REMAINING A STRANGER

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by

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WILLIAM HEINEMANN LTD
MELBOURNE :: LONDON :: TORONTO

FIRST PUBLISHED 1913

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
AT THE WINDMILL PRESS
KINGSWOOD, SURREY

For I am a stranger and a sojourner with thee.

THE BURIAL SERVICE

The characters, manor house and village described in this book are entirely fictitious.

CHAPTER I

BROTHER AND SISTER sat side by side in a narrow, angular pew. Between them, like the sword in the bed of a proxy nuptial, lay Guy's umbrella, tightly rolled, thin-ribbed and spare, insignia of the city man. These two alone sat far up in the front of the church. Behind them, scattered shyly in separate pews (for not one of them had anything to add to a common pool of sorrow and their respectful presence at this funeral service emphasised their isolation rather than brought them together) sat the two or three neighbours who constituted the upper-class population of the village. At the extreme back of the church (for he had come in a few minutes late) sat the doctor, scribbling furtively in his case-book to remind himself of the patient whose bedside he had left shortly before the service started. He wrote careful, detailed notes, shutting his ears to the sound of the vicar's voice. He was a conscientious doctor and knew his failing. His forgetfulness was perhaps the only thing he was never in danger of forgetting. Not that it was any burden to him. He had accepted it long ago and adjusted his way of living to compensate for this particular disability, much as a man with one foot shorter than the other redresses his balance automatically and is hardly aware of his defect.

It was cold in the church and the doctor stretched out his feet towards the wheezing coke-stove under the pillar beside his pew. It gave out little heat for it had been lit only an hour before the service started. Wisps of acrid smoke from the half-burnt wood and smouldering coke inside it seeped out from its many cracks and joints, and created at that end of the church a miniature fog. The doctor had not been there for some years. The place appeared to him to have advanced several stages in decay. He noticed the evidences of it with the same professional interest with which he might have observed the advance of a disease in a patient who had not paid him a visit for a long time. Across the flaking plaster of the north wall spread a deep green stain, extended and branched like tendrils of ivy, and in the crumbling fissures between the ancient blocks of stone, innumerable little fungi sucked in the mouldy air and breathed out a rank, mephitic miasma. The arches of the south aisle leaned precariously. *Ask Vicar to measure angle*, wrote the doctor in the back of his case-book, with much interest. He reached for the visitors' book which lay on a prayer-desk near his pew, and held it vertically before his eyes, the better to observe the careening architrave. It's at least fifteen degrees out of the straight, he said to himself and drew a neat diagram on his page. We shall have to appeal for funds or the place will totter about our ears. Before replacing the book he opened it, curious to see who last had visited this mouldering village church.

November 11th. Mr. and Mrs. Briggs, Rotherham.
Sad but proud.

He read the words slowly and wondered what had brought this husband and wife from Yorkshire to a remote Dorset village in the cold of an Armistice Day. That was three months ago, just when Mrs. Ritchie was taken worse. He replaced the visitors' book and fumbled again in his notes.

November 8th. Mrs. Ritchie. Vomiting.
November 11th. Called in Jamieson.

This was the funeral of Mrs. Ritchie. He was recalled by these terse notes to the service, of which he had not hitherto heard a syllable. The vicar's words came to his ears as out of a well, the voice giving back from the streaming walls a faintly perceptible, watery echo. The doctor settled himself as comfortably as he could and gave his attention to the service.

The several members of the congregation averted their eyes from the coffin and searched the words which fell among them for some clue to their own state of mind. From them, they hoped, would emerge the justification for their presence here, the message peculiar to themselves, the cabalistic phrase which would unlock for them the mystery of their attendance at the funeral. Not one of them was, in the strict sense, a mourner. Duty, convention or curiosity had brought them together in church. Having made the

effort to come, each felt entitled to a message at least. There was nothing else to be obtained from a funeral save the lasting peace of the corpse.

We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.

The ancient Egyptians, thought Felicia Ritchie, buried with the dead their favourite hounds, bowls of food and flasks of drink for the long journey into the night, weapons for the celestial hunting fields and toys for the playgrounds of heaven. A pagan superstition, thought Felicia severely, yet she had observed her mother's wishes that she should be buried with her wedding-ring still upon her finger and the locket containing her husband's hair still around her neck. Felicia had seen to it that these memoria of a dead passion were put safely in their place just before the coffin was screwed down. This operation she had supervised in person, for she was convinced that undertakers were robbers. Although she deprecated the waste involved, she respected the wishes of the dead and thereby gave herself a certain pleasure which more than counterbalanced her disapproval.

Felicia's religious beliefs were of a pure, pectose quality, valuable in themselves but without any pervasive sweetening or ripening effect upon Felicia herself. Her excessive spirituality had about it nothing of the lambent quality of the mystic's faith. She irradiated no inner fire. She wore her spirituality as an armour. It ensheathed her like a glossy carapace. Her very

kindnesses, and they were many, were a kind of extract which, generous enough in itself, seemed rather the secretion of a peculiarly active gland in her moral make-up than an essence distilled from her personality as a whole.

Her thoughts turned towards her mother's property and fortune, but without a hint of greed. Whatever came to her, she intended to do good with it, and the habit of self-denial had for so long frosted over the more genial currents of her being that it was unlikely that any flow of spendthrift enjoyment would result from the sudden wealth she knew would be hers. The damp rising from the stones beneath her feet and the veined, glaucous walls beside her, reminded her of the first call upon her money. She would instal a new heating system in the church. It would be her Easter Offering.

I die daily.

The dramatic alliteration of the phrase pleased the doctor no less than its personal significance for himself. The rest of the service, up till that point restlessly endured, had no meaning for him. He found at last in these words the necessary tangent to convey him mentally from the church's ritual to the circle of his own experience. He suddenly saw St. Paul as a man very much like himself, going through the day's events and dismissing them firmly to oblivion, dying daily, in his own graphic phrase. The doctor counted himself a genial man, and blessed the habit of forgetfulness

which made it possible for his geniality to flourish unchoked by regrets or memories of past misfortunes. Feeling that he must pin the phrase down quickly, he pulled out his cuff (he still wore collars and cuffs of a glossy, enamelled stiffness) and scribbled with deep satisfaction the words: *I die daily*. From that point on he listened with an attention as rapt as a neophyte. When the vicar brought the epistle to an end in a blaze of trumpets, it was all the doctor could do to restrain himself from clapping and crying, 'Bis! Bis!'

We shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye . . .

Like ruddy lights in a fog, the golden words peered out at Miss Shapiro from the brumous curtain of superstition and poetic rapture which surrounded her. The mellifluous tones of the vicar recalled to her those well-trained and vibrant voices of her Shakespearean days, when she had been a minor but by no means inferior scintillation upon the London stage.

O death where is thy sting! O grave, where is thy victory!

trolled the vicar, and

Be absolute for death, either death or life
Shall thereby be the sweeter,

carolled Miss Shapiro's heart, recognising in Mr. Wrottesley at his lectern the actor manqué who lurks in every good clergyman's breast. Miss Shapiro saw

him as Brutus, his fine-cut fanatic features rising sculpturally above the marble-white toga, or as Horatio, the only noble pillar left standing among the ruins of the house of Hamlet. With what sublimity would he pronounce the words:

Now cracks a noble heart: goodnight, sweet prince,
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!

Miss Shapiro sniffed the damp, musty air, as she had sniffed it in so many chilly dressing-rooms in provincial theatres, and she felt exhilarated. Why not get up a play in the village? Scenes from Shakespeare? A death scene, she thought suddenly, gazing joyfully at the dark brown coffin. The tomb scene from *Romeo and Juliet.*

Give me that mattock and the wrenching iron.

Miss Shapiro looked round at the four stolid villagers who were sitting in the side aisle. Their glum, conscientious expressions recalled her to the immediate purpose of her presence in the church and she realised that the *Romeo and Juliet* scene would be too topical. It would have to be something cheerful and light, on the lawn in the vicarage garden. *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* Popular but inevitable. She looked up at the face of Mr. Wrottesley. He was reading his Pauline Epistle with a fine dramatic delivery and passion. She saw him as Lysander, pursuing . . . Miss Ritchie as Hermia? 'A match!' she cried to herself, mentally clapping her frosted hands, and the words: *I heard a*

voice from heaven, saying unto me, write . . . came pat upon her thoughts, putting to her designs the seal of superstitious approval as surely as if the command had been written by a hand upon the flaking wall of the church. She decided to drop a note to the vicar about it as soon as she got home.

The lesson was over. The vicar took up his stand on the chancel steps and peered hopefully down the aisle towards the little knot of villagers seated in the side pews. There was a scraping of feet as the four stalwarts arose and padded sheepishly up the aisle, lifting their heels delicately to prevent a noise which might disturb the suppositious rest of the corpse or interrupt the grief of the mourners. They lifted the coffin from its trestles and, respectfully averting their gaze from the rigid figures of the bereaved brother and sister in the front pew, they carried their burden with laborious steps to the west door, the vicar pacing slowly after them.

'Our dear sister here departed,' he repeated to himself anxiously. 'Our dear sister. Our dear *sister*.' Every funeral service he conducted was a burden to him since the sad occasion when he had absently referred throughout to 'our dear brother' over the dead body of a handsome widow killed in a motor accident. He was doubly anxious this afternoon, for his mind was already distressed with a private problem and it was only by continual effort that he kept it like an unwilling horse pulling at the creaking shafts of his

service. 'Our dear sister', he said inwardly with emphasis, as though he were cracking a whip at himself.

The little party, vicar, brother and sister, Miss Shapiro (now dabbing her eyes with the tragic intensity she deemed appropriate) and the rubicund, indifferent doctor, pulling down his shirt-cuff to savour again the words he had scribbled on it—*I die daily*—followed the coffin out into the cold, green churchyard. To Guy Ritchie the whole scene had that spurious and transient clarity of a place seen in a dream which we are certain we have visited before, and, as in a dream too, his emotions were entirely at rest. He observed, and more than that, he absorbed the scene and immersed himself in it as though he were anxious to impress upon his memory the details of a strange, barbaric ritual in which he had been invited to take part. Only at one point did the service speak directly to him, like the words of reality which break into a dream and become part of its fabric, distorted yet recognisable.

Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.

'It is fifteen years since I was here,' thought Guy, suddenly. It was as if these words were the solitary English phrase embedded in a foreign speech and Guy grasped at them and found that their familiarity and the apt gloss they provided upon the way he spent that fifteen years made him suddenly full of question as to his presence here in the church. His mother was dead.

He had not seen her for years. His sister Felicia he had seen from time to time when she visited London, and with her he had maintained at least some sort of correspondence, however uninformative. As though he had only just at that moment realised where he was, he looked around him with curiosity and made a mental gesture of recognition, as conscious and deliberate as a genuflection, towards the top-heavy church-yard elms under which he had strolled as a boy, towards the pale rim of the downs which curved, horse-shoe pattern, around three sides of the village, towards the long lime avenue which led from the church to Chalbury, the house where his mother had died and where he himself had been brought up.

His hands hung empty at his sides and he moved them nervously first towards his pockets, then to meet behind his back, and then up to the lapels of his coat to resettle it on his shoulders. He felt irritable, not knowing what to do with his hands, vaguely aware that he should have been carrying something, one hand at least should have been employed. Restlessly he shifted himself from foot to foot, noting with distaste that lumps of flaccid, yellowish clay sucked at his shoes like quicksand. Instinct told him to prise the clods from the leather with a ferrule and it was then that he realised his loss. He no longer had his umbrella. The ensuing mental search after his lost property effectively diverted his thoughts from the melancholy graveside business.

In the struggling sunshine of the January afternoon they stood round the open grave. On the newly-turned clods, the morning rime had only half melted, leaving a beaded phosphorescence like the trail of innumerable snails.

Man that is born of woman, began the vicar. His voice sounded thin in the cold unresonant churchyard and instinctively he deepened it.

In the midst of life we are in death, he boomed and lifted his eyes to the fine naked trees which bordered the vicarage glebe. He knew the passage by heart.

O holy and most merciful Saviour, deliver us not into the bitter pains of eternal death. Thou knowest, O Lord, the secrets of our hearts . . .

His treacherous eyes, released from the discipline of the written page, rested for a moment upon the beautiful, guarded features of Felicia Ritchie. The horrid significance of the words dammed up the flow of his memory. To the mourners, there seemed a dramatic pause. To the vicar, it was as if he swayed over a chasm. He recovered himself by sternly fastening his gaze once more upon the prayer book. The body was being lowered into the grave.

'Our dear sister. Our dear sister.' He prayed earnestly to himself.

We therefore commit her body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Never before had he felt it necessary to read those words, but he clung to them, without lifting his eyes

from the printed page. He was appalled at the passionate direction of his thoughts. 'His dear sister. His dear Felicia.' In an agony of self-condemnation, he led the way back to the church and falling on his knees in his chancel pew, buried his face for a moment in his hands.

Lord, have mercy upon us.

His thoughts receded like an evil tide.

Almighty God, with whom do live the spirits of them that depart hence, he read from the open book in front of him, . . . *for they are delivered from the burden of the flesh* . . . he paused for a second, and felt himself miraculously delivered. In ringing, confident tones (which made the doctor look up and mutter to himself, 'By God, the man believes it all!' and Miss Shapiro shake her head in silent admiration) he continued, rising to a climax at the words, *That we, with all those that are departed in the true faith of Thy holy name, may have our perfect consummation and bliss, both in body and soul.* Cheerfully he pronounced the provocative words, exulting in their spiritual significance and using them as a kind of besom to sweep the last remnants of unholy thoughts from his heart.

Completely absorbed, he embarked on the final collect, reading with the rapt concentration of the zealot:

O Father, raise us from the death of sin into the life of righteousness, that when we shall depart this life, we may rest in him as this our brother doth . . .

He rose to his feet and stood in the centre of the chancel steps, his hands upraised in blessing.

The grace of our Lord . . . he pronounced, his eyes resting for a moment in gentle compassion upon the bereaved brother and sister. Never before had he been so overwhelmingly conscious of the blessed comfort in the words of the burial service.

CHAPTER II

FELICIA AND GUY RITCHIE left the church together and walked down the lime avenue which led to the Manor. So little did Felicia know of her brother that she was able to chat to him as though he were a stranger.

"I am surprised at Mr. Wrottesley making that mistake in the last collect."

"Did he make a mistake? I haven't an intimate enough acquaintance with the burial service to know."

"He said 'our dear brother' instead of 'our dear sister'. Surely you noticed it?"

"I was thinking about something else, I am afraid."

"Yes, I can understand that. At a time like this, one does become reflective, doesn't one?"

"I was overjoyed."

"Overjoyed?"

"Yes. You see, I thought I had lost my umbrella. And then when we got back to the church after the 'dust to dust and ashes to ashes', I found I'd left it in the pew."

"Oh. Is it a very good umbrella?"

"I don't like losing my property. It *was* an expensive umbrella, as a matter of fact."

"How nice that it wasn't lost! To return to what I was saying—Do you think I ought to mention it to Mr. Wrottesley?"

"Mention what? I'm not quite clear. Have we left the subject of umbrellas yet?"

"I'm talking of Mr. Wrottesley's mistake in the collect."

"Does it really matter?"

"I don't think a clergyman should make a mistake of that kind. And he didn't apologise afterwards for it, either."

"He never noticed, obviously."

"He should have noticed. It's as bad as—as a doctor writing a wrong prescription."

Their feet susurrated over the dead leaves of the lime avenue like beetles over a granary floor. The sound, regular and monotonous, grew unnaturally loud in Guy's ears, like the throb and rhythmical pounding which drums through one's ears in delirium. He was hardly aware of his sister, or of the manor which they were now approaching. The dry rustle of their feet roared round his head like the gusts which blow between the worlds and a vision floated before Guy's inner sight, a vision of his mother, somewhat windblown, at heaven's gate, presenting a certificate. "I'm sorry, madam," Peter was saying, pointing a stumpy finger at the document. "It says 'brother' here. 'Our dear brother'. You can't put this across, you know."

Abruptly, Guy laughed. Felicia looked quickly at him.

"Are you laughing at my comparison?"

"Oh, my dear Felicia, no."

"At what then?"

"At the triviality of my thoughts."

'I shall never know him,' thought the sister. 'I have never entered his life. I have never even stood on the threshold and looked in. What is he really like? I suppose he is successful—at something—and well-off. Why has he never married? What does he do with his time? Where does he spend his leisure? And his life is all leisure.' The questions heaped themselves up in her mind, the first smothered by later arrivals, until she was conscious of a crowd of interrogation clamouring incoherently at the doors of her mind. She had no answers to give. She turned them away and wept a little, gazing up into the lime trees in an effort to conceal her tears. 'No one confides in me,' she cried silently to herself, and jerked her head to chase back a tear which threatened to overflow on to her cheek. This was her secret sorrow but she was not called upon to bear its pangs very often, for she did not care deeply enough for others to feel their coldness as a personal wound. In general, a want of response from others touched her only in her spiritual heart. This organ was well-constructed to convert almost any worldly reverse into a healthy stream of sanguine spirituality. Conscious of her kinship with her Saviour, she rejoiced that she was despised and rejected. Only in the dealings she had with the few people to whom she was bound by an emotional tie,

was she aware of a hollowness, a vacancy within herself which desired she knew not what to fill it, and the tears she shed seemed to force their way up painfully from some deep spring of her being which had no connection whatever with the conduits of her religious suffering.

They walked on in silence. The avenue was as cold as their thoughts. The pale blue of the sky which showed above them, splintered into innumerable fragments by the sharp intersection of branch and twig, was already beginning to steel over into a uniform, indurate grey. On either side of the avenue, little paths led off into the shrubberies where the sodden, bitter-smelling laurels made a blanket through which not even the January frost often penetrated. Down every path the mouldering leaves lay rotting and acrid, unsweetened by frost. The dark wet orifices of these gloomy alleys gaped between the noble ranks of the lime trees like slum passages in the façade of a brilliantly lit and splendidly proportioned street. Guy felt suddenly the itch of the improver.

"The laurels have got out of hand," he observed, "they need cutting out."

Felicia looked at her brother with surprise. She did not feel that it was her place to acquaint him with the terms of the will so she contented herself with the guarded reply:

"*One* of us will have to think about these things now, I suppose."

"When is Griggs coming?"

"Tonight. He'll read the will tomorrow."

"It's a stupid formality. My dear Felicia, you must know what's in it even if I don't."

Felicia hesitated. "Yes . . . yes, I do know what's in it."

"Wouldn't it be more sisterly to tell me?"

She slipped her hand over his arm, and as he stiffened, her natural charitableness came into play. Her brother became for her one who had a claim upon her consideration, one to whom news must be broken gently, whose wounded spirit would be in need of her healing ministrations. She was gratified. Her brother, from being a mysterious stranger with whom she could discover no point of contact even in the death of their common mother, became at once one of the many to whom she dispensed the bottles of her generosity, a distillation already drawn off and labelled, whose expenditure involved no more than a steady hand. Her personality had already been drained of the natural juices which in others, once set working, pervade and frequently upset the economy of the whole.

"I wish you could hear it more impersonally from Mr. Griggs," she said.

"You mean, I am in for a disappointment?"

"I don't know, Guy, because I don't know how much you expected. You see, you did have most of father's money, didn't you?"

"I haven't got it now."

Felicia registered this fact for further discussion. She did not wish to be diverted at the moment into asking the question that obviously must be asked. Kindly, and the kindness was sincere, she said, "Then I think you *will* be rather disappointed and I am sorry. It makes me feel—well, a little mean. But you should know that I would always share my all with you."

"Your all, Felicia? You've inherited everything?"

"No, no. Not everything. Mother was not so unforgiving as all that. But I wish she had known that you no longer had father's money."

"You don't ask me what I've done with it."

"Dear Guy, it's your affair not mine. I hate people who ask too many questions."

"If you don't mind, I'll ask you one. What exactly have I been left?"

"Mother has left you the house and four hundred a year."

"And the capital?"

"That part of the capital is tied up, for your children if you ever marry and have any. If not it reverts to me, or—well, you'll hear the details from Mr. Griggs. Mother did discuss it with me but to be honest, I found the subject so distasteful that I hardly listened."

The pair walked down the weedy gravel of the drive towards the front door. Guy looked at his watch.

"I've time to catch the five-twenty back to town," he said casually. "I haven't unpacked my bag."

"You're not going back tonight?"

"My dear Felicia, you've told me all I want to know. I have a good deal to see to. My presence tomorrow is not legally necessary. You can entertain Griggs and he can write me officially in his own good legal time."

"But Mr. Griggs will want to know your intentions regarding the house——"

"My intentions regarding the house? How easily you slip into attorney phrases, my dear sister. I will let you and Mr. Griggs have my intentions in due course. I assure you, you've made me quite light-hearted. If it wasn't the middle of the afternoon I'd toast our future. I suppose there *is* something in the cellar? If not, for heaven's sake get something in. You ought to offer Griggs some sherry, for one thing."

"But, Guy, surely you'll come in now and have a cup of tea? There's no need to catch that particular train, is there?"

"What, exactly, am I to stay for?"

"I am your sister. It would be more natural."

"I think you confuse the natural with the conventional. Felicia, I do not mean to be unkind, and perhaps we shall get to know each other better in the future, but today, quite frankly, I do not feel in the mood to make conversation with someone who is—really now, my dear Felicia, I intend no unkindness, I am merely being honest—who is so far a stranger to me."

"The day has been a strain for you?"

Felicia wanted to believe this as a fact, but was unable to keep out of her remark the note of interrogation.

"Perhaps," answered Guy, without conviction. "You do not mind being left, do you? You will be all right? Good-bye, my dear Felicia, good-bye. No gloomy thoughts tonight? You've got the servants. It's not as though the place were empty. Perhaps Mr. Wrottesley will call to apologise for metamorphosing my poor mother into a man. Or perhaps, if Pythagoras was right, she is one already, or would it be a French bean? I see you are shocked, and I—well, I am being horribly flippant. I am sorry. Good-bye, my dear. I find it so difficult to be serious about things so remote from me."

Felicia was stung. "I should hardly have thought mother's will was remote from you."

"No. No. Of course it is not. Felicia, you must forgive me. I am not always as unpleasing as this. Good-bye again."

He kissed his sister's cold cheek, picked up his bag from the hall chair and was gone.

CHAPTER III

THE MANOR HOUSE and village lay in a valley just off the main road. Guy reached the bus stop in a few minutes and looked at his watch. It was not yet four o'clock. The bus only took about thirty minutes to do the journey into Weymouth. He felt reluctant to return to London by the five-twenty, which would deliver him home by the early hour of ten or a little after. 'She will be awake,' he thought with distaste. In the now faded light, he drew out his timetable and found that there was another train at seven which would bring him home late enough to avoid any domestic questioning. He returned to the drive, thrust his bag behind the hedge and set off walking.

The main road at this point cut through a miniature gorge, where two shoulders of the down lay in close proximity. He remembered from his boyhood a lane which led up the face of the seaward hill to the encampment which crowned the summit. The lights in the farmhouse at the foot of the slope were still unlit, and the grey stone face of the house presented to him as he passed the blank stare of a stranger. As he reached the gate, a tall, well-set-up man of about fifty came round the corner of the building, carrying a bucket. He wore no coat, despite the cold, and his clothes hung

on his spare figure with an air of bleak decency which, with the cheerless, opaque eyes of the house, and the slap of the cold well-water in the bucket as he swung it over the stone threshold, accelerated for Guy the progress of the January cold, and brought darkness several strides closer upon his heels. How curious, Guy reflected, that here where I might be said to have returned as it were to my own country, I find myself utterly a stranger. It was not that he expected the man to recognise him, though he thought he remembered him as the occupant of the farm fifteen years before—a man called Pouncy. Nor did he suppose that the house, the lane, the still shapes of the trees, would remember him, or extend to him any welcome. Had the lights in the farm windows glowed into the outer air, it would have suggested to him no symbolic warmth of greeting. It was something other than the response of nature or of stone which he looked for. It was rather the awakening of something in himself, the reaching out towards his present self of the boy from the past who might live still in this ancient lane.

He was well above the farmhouse now, out of the trees. The lane was deeply sunk into the side of the hill, and on either hand rose steep banks, scored with long chalky weals where walkers impatient to get their first sight of the sea had climbed precariously along the lip of the embankment, their heels scoring the slippery turf. He remembered well the point at which to mount the steep bank and, with a final expectation

of youth renewed, he climbed it at a certain bend and saw spread before him the long curve of the bay, the western peninsula stretched like an index finger towards the clear line of the horizon. The sky was colourless, the sun low. Not a single streak of red betrayed its setting. Put up a hand between the ball of the eye and that bloodshot circle, and you would never have known that a sun remained in the sky.

Already the half-conscious wish to find his old identity and by some means graft himself upon it (thus reversing the natural order of scioning a young shoot upon an older tree) had receded into the back of his mind. The lane seemed very familiar to him, every contour of it was anticipated by his photographic memory and therefore emphasised the illusion that he had walked up it very recently, but he found nothing remarkable, nothing compelling, in his inward reactions to this favourite haunt of his boyhood, and he therefore dropped his desire to recapture his youthful self in fayour of a more direct and predatory design upon the actual body of the scene.

'I shall win this countryside for myself,' he cried inwardly, with the exhilaration of a man who sees among a crowd of strangers the form of a woman who excites his admiration and regard. Perhaps the thought was prompted in the first place by his dominant position so high in solitude above the slopes of the lower downs, which unfurled their long gradines from the hills to sea level, like unrolled material. The desire to recap-

ture this countryside seemed the natural pursuivant of the discovery that he no longer held a stake in the soil which in all his years of exile of London he had tacitly regarded as his, as though his boyhood were a kind of balm which might have preserved for him the hills and fields he first knew.

He was inspired with a new purpose. He began to lay his plans with the same minute and devoted care as a lover who endeavours by external art, sartorial perhaps or conversational, to impress the mistress he hopes to win. 'He would dress the part,' he thought, looking down at his incongruous dark suit, at the formal black Homburg, held in his gloved hand, its rim as bulbous as the lips of a negress, at his thin-skinned city shoes. He found pleasure in contemplating his person, metamorphosed, in scutched tweeds, his glossy hair wind-ruffled, his hands scarred with briar and bush after walking through his demesne. In the few moments he had stood there, unaware of the growing cold, the sun had disappeared behind the hard rim of the sea, and the whole scene had been enveloped in semi-darkness. The chalk cicatrices of his path now gleamed only faintly, a mere suggestion of a surface different from the surrounding turf. The lights of the distant town threw the whole bay into deeper darkness, and merged into a thin golden crescent, as though a young moon were lying along the edge of the sea.

Despite his failure to provoke from these surround-

ings any perceptible tremor, as of old workings underfoot which might yet be reopened, his solitary walk had enabled him to meditate upon the impressions of the day and to relate them to his own life. He had, for a few hours, entered as a stranger a circumscribed, closely-knit community in which to have a position implied the possession of a definite and well-recognised identity. There was no anonymity in a country village. The mourners at the funeral were the same people who appeared at every funeral in the neighbourhood, and at every wedding too. Village life was of their making. The man at the farm who had not recognised him had been there all his life, known of and knowing all around him. He had slipped from boyhood to manhood and then to middle-age but was as easily recognisable to Guy as if he had seen him yesterday. Yet *he* had not known Guy.

As the train took him homeward, his thoughts circled around this matter of identity. The bricks and mortar and lamps gradually replaced the dark fields and trees and the scattered orange pinpoints from curtained cottage windows. Guy was aware of an alarming dissipation of his personality. Despite the fact that, technically, he was returning home, he felt himself dispersed and diffused into a dozen or more persons, as though many places in this vast sprawling city claimed him, rather than any one particular house. In a city one possessed no fixed identity, one was fluid, receptive, chameleonic. The concentrated weight of

recognition which had greeted him in the church, for even those who did not know him personally knew well enough who he was and what position he held in the ritual of the funeral, was now removed. The fact that he was returning not merely to his own house but to the occupant of it who of all people might most be expected to recognise and accept him, gave him no pleasure or security, but rather filled him with dismay, for he knew now with certainty what he had suspected for some time—that he was like a man who speaks a foreign tongue for so long that he forgets his own: he was in danger of becoming the person he was expected to be by the circles in which he moved. What other identity he might have had was not perfectly clear to him but now that the role of a countryman was suddenly offered to him, he grasped at it eagerly.

Three and a half hours after leaving Weymouth, he let himself into his London home. The light was not burning in the hall for he was not expected, and he tiptoed up the stairs, pausing at every creak. The light was still on in Vera's room. He heard her bed groan, the rustle of her silk as she hurried across the floor. He stood outside passively, waiting to be discovered.

"Why have you come back tonight?"

"I'm sorry you're still awake," he said, without answering her question. "Couldn't you sleep?"

She in her turn ignored this (they were used to leaving each other's questions unanswered). She

slipped back into her bed and arranged her nightdress artfully around her shoulders.

"Come and talk to me, Guy. Tell me all about the funeral. I adore funerals. Funerals and weddings. Birth and death—what is there in life that really matters but these two?"

"I'm very tired, Vera. I'll go to bed if you don't mind."

Her vague manner became instantly more alert.

"Why have you come back, then? There's not unpleasant news, is there? About the will, I mean?"

"It's late to talk about it," he said wearily, but he sat down. Vera lit a cigarette and tossed him one from a shagreen case by her bedside.

"Poor boy," she said, and he winced. "Poor boy, you look fagged out. Perhaps I ought to go and get you a nightcap."

"No, it's not necessary. There's no bad news at all."

"You've been left something? Something worth while?"

"I don't know that many people would consider it worth while."

"How much?"

Her voice was not greedy. It was solicitous. She wanted it for Guy. She was, certainly, extravagant herself, but only to please him, to hold him. It was Guy's happiness she strove for, Guy's content.

"Tell me," she cooed and fluffed her fallen ash from the sheet.

"My mother has left me four hundred a year."

She gazed at him round-eyed.

"Oh, Guy!" she cried in heart-broken tones. "Oh, Guy!"

She started to climb out of bed and he knew that in a moment his head would be held against her palpitating breast, his hair would feel the caress of her fingers, and his whole being would melt into sensuous response. He got up abruptly.

"Don't distress yourself, my dear Vera. I have been left the manor house as well."

"Oh," she sighed, with relief. "That should sell well. I suppose it's not entailed?"

"I dare say it might sell, only I intend to live in it."

"But Guy—down there in the wilds? I couldn't bear it."

"You won't have to."

He was too tired and too indifferent to cushion the remark, and for a moment Vera did not seem to have taken it in. Then as she realised what he had said, a deep flush spread from her face over her naked neck and shoulders. He looked at it with admiration, tempted almost to tell her how much her chagrin became her.

"You'll never be able to look after yourself, Guy darling. You'll be miserable. You're not the bachelor type."

"Oh, my good Vera!" He burst out in anger, for she had touched his vulnerable spot and he was humiliated

at her knowledge of him. To escape from that alone would be a form of rebirth. "Leave me alone." (His ill-temper made him pettish). "Leave me alone. I can't discuss it at this time of night."

He left the room. As he undressed, he could hear Vera's sobbing rise to a noisy crescendo, and then subside into a regular, even-toned weeping, a faint pulse of disturbance in the silent house as he lay between the ice-cold sheets and wooed an unresponsive sleep.

CHAPTER IV

IN HIS STUDY the vicar wrestled unhappily with his conscience. 'She is so beautiful,' he moaned to himself, and gazed at a blurred photograph in his hand, a cutting from the local newspaper which showed Felicia Ritchie, with deep shadows under her eyes and a black cavity where her mouth should have been, judging an indeterminate exhibit at the flower-show of the summer before last. Yet the vicar was right. Felicia Ritchie was beautiful, in a statuesque, Parian manner. The photograph was to him not so much a likeness as a charm. It was one of the few trappings of romance which he possessed, and evoked for him a world of pressed flowers, scented handkerchiefs, and treasured memories which was very far from being a reality, for his connection with Felicia had always been of a brisk, professional nature, and the flowers, handkerchiefs and memories were, alas, those of the jumble sale, not of the personal, intimate encounter. He kept the photograph in a locked drawer of his desk together with two or three little notes she had written him—all on strictly business matters; a pencil she had borrowed from his desk during a committee meeting, and an embroidered egg cosy of impeccable taste, worked by Felicia for a church bazaar and, daringly, purchased from the stall by the vicar.

'She is so good,' he went on. 'So truly good.' And at the contemplation of so wonderful yet so inaccessible an object of affection, he beat his thin knuckles into the ink-stained wood of the desk, for he knew that he dared not approach her.

"Money," he murmured, "the root of all evil."

He took a sheet of foolscap from the drawer by his knee, closed his eyes for a moment and then began to write.

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth.

He underlined the words, and then, breaking down for a moment, he rested his forehead against his hand, and muttered, half-aloud, "Oh, God, it's not her money I want. It's not her money."

He roused himself with an effort and started to write once more:

Dearly beloved brethren, the Apostle tells us of a certain man who desired greatly to follow our blessed Lord. But Jesus perceived that he was wealthy. "Sell all thou hast and give it to the poor," He said. And, we are told, the man went away sorrowful, for he had great riches. What a lesson for us, my friends, is here. Perhaps we cannot literally sell all we have (a true son of the Church, the vicar was always ready to modify the more revolutionary of his Saviour's statements), but there is a spiritual meaning here for each one of us, even the poorest. We cannot follow him with pure hearts, we cannot hope for ultimate salvation, while we treasure earthly possessions. And that very money

which can be an instrument for good, may prove the stumbling block over which we fall in our path to higher things. I too, my friends, have faltered.

Dare he introduce the personal touch? He thought of Hosea laying bare to all coming generations the sordid story of his faithless wife and his magnanimous forgiveness of her, and he was emboldened. At least there was nothing sordid in his own story:

My friends, money is like to be my stumbling-block too. Not the desire of it. I believe I can say in all humility that I am guiltless of that. But, dear brethren, so wicked a power has money that the mere presence of it on the one hand and lack of it on the other can poison an innocent and happy relationship. For money is the yardstick by which the world measures, and I must abandon my love, for the world will stigmatise me as a fortune-hunter if I aspire to the hand of her whom my soul desireth like as the hart the water-brooks.

The vicar stared at the words, appalled at what he had written. He snatched the paper up and thrust it into the fire. Sitting and gazing into the glow, at the black web of paper which still hovered and fluttered over the coal and on which he could still read a few phrases of his sermon, he looked back over his youth, over his ardent celibacy, and knew he had been mistaken. Man and woman created He them. It was not good for man to live alone. His thoughts ran in familiar grooves. Yet it behoved a man, particularly

a priest, to choose carefully, to obey the dictates of his head rather than his heart. His contacts with Miss Ritchie were many. On committees, at bazaars, in all church matters she was his constant helpmeet. What fitter than that he should invite her to share his life more closely? Surely God had brought them together with some purpose, and here Mr. Wrottesley's faith in the Almighty's all-guiding hand suffered a severe strain. Why, having placed this woman almost as it seemed in his direct path, why did God choose to endow her with worldly goods which placed her quite beyond his reach? Her fortune, while it did not effect her as a good churchwoman (for he was confident that she would not abuse her wealth) placed her at once in a different category from the woman who supplied the jumble for his sales and the notes for his committee meetings.

By contrast with his present situation, the past took on a far more favourable aspect than it had really worn at the time, and Mr. Wrottesley saw himself as an importunate lover, on the brink of a declaration, now brutally pulled up short in his amorous pursuit by a barrier thrown across his path by malignant fate. He rocked his head in his hands. If only he had been bolder. If only he had proposed six months ago. But the long habit of celibacy had made him shy with women. He was lonely and ardent and longed to see Felicia sitting on the opposite side of the fire to himself. How often he had indulged the dream, and now,

it appeared, he had lost the substance. Perhaps, after a decent interval. . . .? But the vicar knew the futility of the suggestion even as he made it. He was not young. He could not afford to wait.

It was easy now, with this monstrous barrier of Felicia's inheritance plainly in his way, to belittle the difficulties which had prevented him from making an earlier proposal, but in fact, they had seemed at the time as insuperable as her money appeared now. Chief among them was Felicia herself. Her manner, always so gentle, so sympathetic and even at times, he fancied, affectionate, carried none the less an air of *noli me tangere* which distracted Mr. Wrottesley, and, perversely, induced in him an even greater admiration for his goddess. In her chastity he had recognised the counterpart of his own and felt with a fairly strong certitude that God would forgive his apostacy from the celibate ideal if it were to unite himself with such a woman. His assurance of divine approval had not, however, made it any easier for him to overcome his difficulty in pressing his suit, and if Felicia's somewhat militant chastity had been a stumbling block to him before, now that this chastity was encircled with a golden belt, he had even greater reason to despair.

His thoughts at last pursued their way beyond his conscious apprehension, as the galaxies recede from sight. He sat, motionless and empty in the sombre study, beside a dying fire. Not for some time did a course of action suggest itself to him and then it was

only as a last resort that he adopted it, for he felt, with lurking shame, that even though from God no secrets are hid, his particular problem was one he would have preferred to have concealed from his Maker. It was with the desperation of the schoolboy who stakes his last hope on prayer that Mr. Wrottesley put on his coat and crossed the churchyard to his church. He switched on the chancel lights and knelt down in his place. His hassock had split at the corner and a little spurt of sawdust bulged out on to the floor as he knelt on it. He made a mental note of it, thankful for this practical consideration which deferred the moment when he must begin to pray. He would change the hassock for another. He settled himself into the habitual attitude of prayer. The minutes passed, checked off as on a tally by a series of regular thuds from the church clock, resembling in the damp atmosphere the regular drip of water upon stone. This aural reminder of time's inexorable passage brought into Mr. Wrottesley's mind the more forcibly the melancholy hopelessness of his own position, in which time had played so exacting a part. Bitterly he lamented his inability to snatch time by the forelock, and every instance of lost opportunity in his life came crowding into his mind and mingled with his incoherent orisons.

But for his fatal procrastination, he lamented, while his lips murmured by rote the collect which begins, 'Remember, O Lord, what thou hast wrought in us

and not what we deserve'—but for his fatal procrastination he might have attained a living in Bristol instead of this obscure, poverty-stricken parish with its crumbling, lop-sided church. He was compelled to lay aside his prayers in order to wrestle with his conscience at this point and subdue the unworthy thought that he might have served God better in the robe of a cathedral dean than he could in the surplice of a country vicar. These reflections left him for a few moments exhausted, and he was unable to reassemble the scattered remnants of his supplication.

The same failure to grasp the skirts of opportunity, he reflected, had made him refuse, on the grounds of his own inadequacy, an official position on the Diocesan Council, of little importance in itself but which might have brought him into contact with his fellow clergy and with his bishop and thus led to advancement. The offer had never been renewed. Mr. Wrottesley's bishop did not think highly of his work. He felt these things keenly and a host of minor evasions and deferments with them. For years they had destroyed his peace of mind and filled him with a vague discontent, but nothing had caused him such agony of spirit as his realisation that Felicia, by her acquisition of worldly wealth, had been placed so far beyond his reach that all his hopes of making her his wife were dashed. If one part of him, even unconsciously, acquiesced in this, recognising that at least he was now relieved of the burden of a proposal, another part was the more

inflamed and the more unwilling to relinquish a hope which appeared to burn the more fiercely, the further it was removed from realisation.

When he again addressed himself to his Maker it was with so much fervour and absorption that he failed to notice another sound, scratching like a mouse behind the regular throb of the clock. Feet were scraping on the gravel outside the church door. There was a long shuddering creak as it was pushed open and the heels of the intruder tapped up the aisle for a little way and then stopped. The vicar raised his head suddenly. Standing half-way down the church, her large brown eyes fixed upon himself in tender interrogation, stood Felicia Ritchie.

'O God, my heart is ready, my heart is ready,' whispered the vicar involuntarily, and rose from his knees.

"You have come," he said to Felicia, and took her hand. She was grateful for the gesture. Although she had found it hard to love her mother, she had come to regard her as the object of a somewhat impersonal devotion and without her she felt a sense of loss. Some spring in her economy was running to waste now, some powerful current of devotion was dissipated and it was with the purpose of laying her gifts, spiritual and material, before God and asking him to direct them into fresh channels that she had entered the church this night, two days after the funeral. On her way through the churchyard she had laid a bunch of snow-drops from

the manor garden on the dark ground of her mother's grave. The smell of sour, upturned earth had repelled her but she had enjoyed the feeling that even when dead her mother had some claim upon her filial duty.

The vicar and Felicia sat down side by side in a pew. She was about to drop on to her knees when she found herself anchored to her place by his hand laid heavily upon her thigh.

"My dear," she heard him say, "you are come in answer to my prayers."

Something in her responded instantly. He was in need of her. Was it possible that God had answered *her* prayer before it was even directed to His presence on the rocket of her devotions?

"What is it, Mr. Wrottesley?" she asked softly, for she would never have spoken in her ordinary voice in church.

"I know you will not judge me as the world judges, Felicia," he said. His pale grey eyes were watering slightly and she was very concerned for him. He was in trouble. She laid a long, cool hand over his and gazed frankly and earnestly into his face. Mr. Wrottesley was overcome. Unable to bear any more he slipped forward on his knees, buried his face in his hands and wept. Silently Felicia knelt beside him, at a loss as to how to deal with his distress.

The clock gave a dismal groan, let out a whirr like covey of pigeons rising from a dovecote, and boomed the hour of seven. The sound roused Mr. Wrottesley

from his trance. He rose from his knees somewhat sheepishly, and tried to form the words he knew he must speak. Alas, he had again lost his moment. The presence of Felicia beside him seemed to him now no answer to a prayer but an incongruity and an embarrassment. He hardly knew how they came to be standing there, and he only longed to escape from the predicament in which he found himself. Helplessly he allowed Felicia to take charge of him, to lead him gently from the church like a nursemaid. She took him back to the manor and over the benison of a substantial supper he unburdened to her the weary story of his disappointment in preferment. She listened with feminine sympathy and when he rose to go, he said with heart-felt gratitude: "Sometimes one feels so useless, dear Felicia. And then it is difficult to see one's way. You have been such a help to me tonight. What a bore I've been, dragging up the past and burdening you with my futile troubles. Will you forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive, Mr. Wrottesley." (Despite their long friendship she never permitted herself the use of his Christian name. That he called her by hers was, she felt, merely the prerogative of his cloth). "What are friends for if not to help shoulder burdens? And you and I *are* friends. Now that I have money of my own I shall need your advice and help all the more and I hope you will give it to me. I can do great good with my inheritance if God guides me.

And there is one thing I have planned already. It shall be my Easter offering to the church. Shall I keep it a secret, Mr. Wrottesley, or tell you now?"

A cloud passed over the vicar's face. "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth," he murmured automatically.

"I do not intend to," said Felicia with a slight tartness in her voice. "I intend that my money shall be used for spiritual purposes."

But he did not ask her her plans and she was faintly disappointed.

"Good-night. God bless you, God bless you." The vicar's voice coming out of the darkness of the drive had a hopeless finality about it as though it was the last time he hoped to hold converse with her, and feared that even their mild friendship was to be endangered by this fateful gift of money. No longer were they in relation even of pastor and helpmeet but she was to become his patroness and his position was to be underlined and emphasised—the poor incumbent, the failure, the man disappointed in love and preferment.

CHAPTER V

GUY WALKED into the sitting-room.

"Your visitor gone?" he asked.

Felicia jumped to her feet, surprised, and went towards him with hands extended.

"Guy! I'd no idea you were back."

"I arrived over an hour ago and found you out."

"But why didn't you let me know you were coming?"

"Do I have to? It's my house."

Felicia's welcome withdrew like a wave expended. But she was not one to shrivel into an inhibited silence, for her nature was well used to welcoming each rebuff and indeed responded almost with eagerness to a repulse or an affront. If for a moment she was silent it was because she had been presented with a new species of humiliation and required a few moments in which to find a foothold upon its unpromising surface and surmount it with her practised spiritual agility.

"Perhaps it is precisely because it *is* your house, your home, that I should have liked to give you a proper welcome to it. Is it too late in the evening for a cup of tea, old man?"

"Much too late. Besides, I never drink it."

But Felicia had rallied well. "You will, if you stay here long. It's the only drink the country knows."

Guy looked thoughtfully at his sister.

"We must have a talk, Felicia."

"Of course," she cried. "I do so want to know what you are going to do with Chalbury. Dear old house."

She paused, aware even herself that her emotions had found their expression as usual only in fatuities. Tears sprang readily to her eyes and she wished the words unsaid. But Guy did not appear to have noticed them.

"I am going to live in it," he said deliberately.

"But . . . how? I thought you said . . . father's money——"

"No, don't count on father's money contributing to the upkeep. There's little enough of that left and it's . . . earmarked."

"Then—how?"

"Meaning four hundred a year won't keep up a place like this and leave me any pocket money?"

Felicia became practical.

"Of course we—you could let all but the small wing. You could live very comfortably in that. Or you could let it for the whole summer—to wealthy Americans perhaps—and live in it for the winter. Or you could even sell what's left of the land, though there's very little now. About thirty-five acres. It wouldn't bring in much, I suppose. And how obnoxious to have speculative builders, perhaps, erecting an estate all around us. No, I couldn't bear it."

"But, my dear sister, you won't have to bear it."

He remembered the words as an echo of what he had said to Vera. 'You won't have to bear it.' He smiled and Felicia, thinking the smile was intended for her, smiled back, and said, almost archly:

"Why won't I have to bear it, old man?"

"Because I am going to live here—in the whole house. You have made some very interesting suggestions but there is one which has not apparently occurred to you—that you should live here too and contribute to the upkeep. Together we could keep it going, I think. After all, it's a very small house, as such houses go, and it's in tolerably good repair. We could keep it going I am sure, in a simple style, you know."

"Guy," said Felicia, crossing to his chair and poising herself on its broad arm. "I don't feel I know you very well. You can't know me either. I know I can be happy here for it's my own environment. I've spent my life here. I've made it my own. Now you propose to enter it. But are you going to be happy in it? After living in London all these years?"

"Is it happiness which *you* have been pursuing in your rural retreat, Felicia?"

"Good gracious, no," cried his sister, as though he had suggested something indecent.

"But you *are* happy here?"

"I think so."

"Well, perhaps environment has something to do with it. I intend to try it—like taking the waters, you know."

"But, Guy, I am so afraid you won't find it all you think, that you *won't* be happy."

"Perhaps you do not know what happiness is."

"Perhaps none of us do."

"How enigmatical we are getting, my dear Felicia. The air is full of unanswered questions. Let's have an answer to this one at least—will you stay here and pay for the privilege of being my housekeeper at, say, £250 a year? To any one else this would be an impertinence, but we are brother and sister so I feel no shame."

"I should want to think about it a little first."

"You think then, Felicia. I'll walk round the house. I haven't been in it for a long time. How many years?"

"Fourteen . . no, fifteen," answered his sister slowly, as he went into the hall.

In the empty room she remembered the fifteen years and saw them simply as a chasm, deep but quite narrow and unalarming. Her experience during them had been negligible, a mere routine of living which had deepened her natural characteristics but had not broadened them, so that she was now by fifteen years the more essentially Felicia, but to her original personality had been added very little. She had attempted no escape. She had known no longings for another or fuller life, and the lack of deviation from her groove had only allowed her passage down it to be the more expeditious. It seemed to her only yesterday that she had said good-bye to her brother in this room before he departed for London. Even then, at the age of eighteen, he had little intention

of returning, for his relations with his mother were far too disagreeable to make him even a willing visitor. Felicia herself had felt little affection for this self-centred, dried-up woman. Fifteen years of devotion to the thankless task of looking after her might have soured a more volatile, impatient or ardent daughter and changed her out of all recognition, but Felicia remained herself, with all her earlier potential characteristics ripened, toughened and emphasised, so that to Guy she seemed unaltered, not even very much older, but certainly more clearly, sharply defined, almost an exaggerated version of the Felicia he remembered, like a completed pen and ink drawing which he had last seen as a faint pencil sketch. As he wandered over the dark silent house, he was conscious again of the dissimilarity between himself and his sister, a dissimilarity so closely knit as to present itself to him in the likeness of a single sphere of which brother and sister were the opposite aspects, himself the southern and prodigal hemisphere, Felicia the ice-bound north. He felt a desire to merge, to effect a union between these spheres. 'I feel spiritually incestuous,' he said to himself, pausing at the top of the stairs to look down into the hall. It was unlighted. The sitting-room door was still open and he saw the figure of his sister standing before the fire as he had left her, her hand resting on the mantelpiece, her long, elegant body shining in a nimbus of firelight.

'She is attractive, this sister of mine,' he began,

but he felt compelled to correct himself. 'No, not attractive. But she is very personable. Very good-looking. Almost beautiful. It is a curious thing that to be attractive, to draw someone else to one, one must expend oneself. As though by creating a vacuum within oneself, by an expenditure of personality, one thereby sucks in the personality of those around one. Felicia is generous but she gives everything except herself.'

He went slowly down the stairs and into the warmth of the room.

"I think," he said, bending his cold face to the blaze, "that in future we might keep a fire burning in the hall. I find this house very chilly. Could we afford that, do you think, on our joint contributions to the kitty?"

Felicia looked at him with concern.

"I always keep a little whisky in the cupboard. I think I'll get you a hot drink."

He lay back in his chair and watched her. How pleasurable it is, he reflected, that I shall now be looked after by the impersonal domestic hands of a sister with whom I am not compelled to spend the night.

For her part Felicia recognised in her brother the necessary recipient of her talent for generosity. With him in the house she would be able to continue her way of life, and she was relieved, for fundamentally she had no desire to make a change. The lips of the chasm across which her present self viewed her old self and Guy, in the brother-sister relationship they

had shared in their late childhood, seemed to be closing before her eyes. Then they had pursued lives entirely similar in event but totally different in meaning. They were like two walkers who pursue the same path but return home with differing accounts of the journey. For she too was aware of the bond between them, a bond of opposites, though she was too little given to introspection to form a very clear definition of it in her mind as her brother did.

Neither of them referred again to the financial proposition which Guy had placed before her. It was tacitly assumed by him to have been accepted. Only at one point during the evening did Felicia stir the unruffled surface of their mutual acceptance of each other, and it was less from curiosity than from a habit of conversation which she had formed during the long years of companionship with her mother, when to be silent was to court the accusation of being dull. Brightly, she looked up from her embroidery and addressed her brother, who had, since dinner, sat thoughtful in his chair, a book suspended from his hand and his eyes following without sight the play of the firelight on the panelling before them.

"Guy," she asked. "What *did* you do with father's money?"

"I spent it on my mistresses," he replied.

"Oh!" Felicia shrivelled.

"That opens the curtains on to another world, doesn't it?" he said. "You have your life here, my dear Felicia.

I have now re-entered it. I don't ask you how you spent this fifteen years. Don't you ask me."

"Yes, but I—but I—" Felicia faltered.

"*How* you lived it," said Guy, "seems to me quite immaterial. I *haven't* asked you the question. If I did I should only get what I asked for. Perhaps you have been living in sin with the vicar."

"Please, Guy, I don't like that sort of remark."

"My dear, I am just being frivolous."

"I don't care for that—that sort of frivolity."

"I wonder if you care for any sort. Oh, my dear Felicia, for heaven's sake don't cry."

"You've upset me." Felicia wiped her eyes. "We were happy years ago, before you went to London."

"Perhaps you didn't ask me questions then."

"Guy—I can't stay with you here—I can't."

He rose quickly to his feet.

"Yes, you can, Felicia. I need you."

He hesitated over her bent head for a moment and then stooped and kissed her cheek.

"Good-night," he said. "I would like to go to bed now. Don't forget. I need you."

"Perhaps I need you, too," said Felicia involuntarily. She gazed wonderingly at him, and at the room around her as though she almost expected to see standing there the person who had made that remark. As Guy closed the door behind him, she shook her head, thus intimating that, whoever had spoken the words, she herself disclaimed responsibility for the observation.

CHAPTER VI

"AND THE NEIGHBOURS?" asked Guy the following morning. "Do I have to go to church to meet them?"

"But do you *want* to meet them, old man? They are not going to be the same sort of people as your London friends."

"You know nothing of my London friends, as you call them, Felicia. You do not even know that I had any. Yes, certainly I mean to get acquainted with the neighbours. But church—no. I think not church. I'll go for a walk. Sermons in stones. . . ."

He had an oddly apologetic way of uttering such little phrases—'sermons in stones'—and others in their actual wording more explicitly sardonic or even offensive. It was as though he felt obliged to say them, but had taken the precaution of removing the sting first so that they lost their taunting, malicious or blasphemous quality and were left empty clichés, or, at the highest valuation, a kind of dull muted echo from a voice speaking a long way off, as it were in the life he had left behind him.

The weather had turned very mild as it does sometimes in January. He climbed up the hill at the back of the manor and found himself so warm that he was able to sit for a while on a loose stone wall near the

summit, overlooking his demesne in the hollow below. The stripped trees allowed his eyes to follow more easily the curves of the down around him and he watched with pleasure a pair of birds whose species he could not identify, curvetting in the faint sunshine over the tops of the church elms, curling and coalescing and falling apart again, mounting higher and higher against the hill's dull green background till they suddenly emerged, like a pair of swimmers, into the blue sky above the shoulder of the down. His attitude to the country, since he found himself unable to recapture or take up the threads again of his absorbed youthful enjoyment of it, was frankly acquisitive. As a tourist collects impressions, as well as picture post-cards, of his travels, so Guy looked eagerly for mental souvenirs, with this difference—that he did not wish to remove them, but rather to mark their spot, so that he might return there and find a pleasure recaptured. He longed to recognise and be recognised, to revisit these scenes again and again until he had become perfectly reacquainted with them, not in the thoughtless geographical familiarity of his youth, but with an intimacy based on knowledge and love.

At no other season could he have found a better opportunity for carrying into effect the conquest of his countryside. The earth was awakening and the pulse of growth throbbed like a turbine under the iron crust of the winter fields. To have arrived in summer would have been to find a country too preoccupied with itself

to admit him. To have taken up his stay in the autumn would have brought him into a decaying, exhausted, world, beautiful in its lurid fungoid colouring only, but otherwise already far withdrawn into the cold embrace of winter and offering to a would-be lover an inconsolable air of coming too late.

The upland over which he walked was shared with no one else. With the eye of an amorist he looked over its curves, folded away and away from him like a frozen sea swell, yet without the limitless inaccessibility of the ocean or the rugged, importunate splendour of mountain country which cries out to be admired. Here were small hills and neat, secluded valleys, tree-filled, so that the gophering of their lower slopes was deeply shadowed. His boyhood knowledge of every path and every wood gave him familiarity with them without any emotional undertow. He used his knowledge as a map. The beautiful impersonality of the scene enchanted him. Indeed it was the qualities which he attached to it, rather than its physical attributes that compelled his love. Here, he told himself, I shall find my identity. It will be evoked, demanded of me, by this environment. One cannot live anonymously in the country as one can in a town. There must be a reason for one's presence—unless one is a mere holiday-maker. Impossible to maintain in the country that purposeful air—which in fact conceals a total want of direction—that busy, secretive look of the townsman. Equally impossible to ignore or be ignored.

He started to walk back. He came again to the stone wall on which he had rested at the outset of his walk, and sat for a moment looking down on the house, the church, and the scattered buildings of the small village. Already he felt a glow of recognition and noted with pleasure that he could even pick out the very stone on which he had sat an hour earlier, a convex black stone, as smooth as velvet and now warm with the sun, as though it had retained his own body heat.

It was half-past twelve and church was over. A car, the only one, drove away from the gate and a little knot of people moving as purposefully as bees, swarmed down the path and then broke into individual figures departing for their separate homes. Among them he recognised the dark-suited form of his sister and with her another shape, masculine and funereal, a kind of burying beetle. The two stopped. There appeared to be a parley and then they re-entered the churchyard and disappeared under the arches of the lime avenue which led to the manor.

'She is taking him home to lunch,' thought Guy with distaste, forgetting his earlier determination to meet his neighbours.

The path from the downs emerged at the lower end of the village and Guy found himself greeted with curious stares and a few hesitant touches of the cap or nods from the returning church-goers. Assuming his squiredom, he answered them heartily, and wished

he knew enough about the men and women he met to enquire after rheumatism, fits and other native ailments. He was disappointed to find how little response he won from the people who were his closest neighbours. It did not occur to him that he had done without recognition of this kind for years, and that his well-meant greetings to such strangers would have evoked stares, if not laughter, in a London street. At least they knew who he was.

A voice hailed him from a garden gate.

"Mr. Ritchie!" it called stridently. "Mr. Ritchie!"

He lifted his cap politely and walked up to the gate.

"How wonderful to see someone from the civilised world again. You haven't been to church, I see. Perhaps that's a mark of civilisation too. I find myself going now, quite regularly. I am only just back, here's my prayer-book, you see. I believe it becomes a kind of necessity in the country. I'm becoming quite a barbarian—almost a hottentot!"

He observed the speaker, puzzled, unable to understand the presence of an oddly dressed, much-painted woman, with histrionic voice and gestures, in this sombre Dorset village. He had no idea who she was, though he remembered her cottage well, a minute, boxlike affair, set back from the road by a long garden. The head-gardener from the manor had lived in it in his father's time. But it was no longer in the property of the manor. Presumably this exotic creature had bought it, a kind of elderly bird whose bright plumage,

though bedraggled, proclaimed her of some natural habitat far removed from these chalk downs and enclosed valleys. She introduced herself briefly—"Olga Shapiro, but I left the stage when you, young man, were just beginning to frequent it, I imagine."

"But, of course, I know your name," he protested, with the gallantry he could see was expected of him. "Indeed, I've often seen your photograph."

She whipped off her extraordinary hat, shook her head violently and amid a shower of hairpins and combs a mass of grey-black dusty hair fell round her shoulders. She glared at him across the garden gate.

"Like this?" she demanded, intensely. He nodded gravely.

"That is how I wore it as Imogen. Almost my favourite part."

She swept her hair away from her face, thrust back into it two or three muddy combs which she retrieved from the path and swung open the gate for him.

"Now come in," she said, "for I've something practical I want to discuss with you."

"I'm afraid I mustn't come in," said Guy firmly. "I should be tempted to stay too long. My sister's expecting me back for lunch."

Miss Shapiro looked him up and down appraisingly.

"You'll do," she crowed and slapped her hat on her head with satisfaction. "You'll do splendidly."

'For what?' he thought apprehensively, for her

bright macaw face was nodding and bobbing to him across the gate, and, like features in a dream, assuming an outlandish size and significance. The road was quite deserted now, the few villagers had returned to their houses for Sunday dinner. He raised his cap (he wore a tweed cap now and his Homburg lay unbrushed in the hall cupboard).

"You will excuse me, won't you?"

Miss Shapiro nearly doubled herself up with delight.

"Oh, indeed! You'll do! You'll do! Admirable!"

She squeezed the words out as though her pleasure had swelled her throat to such proportions that she could hardly speak.

It was difficult to leave her when she acknowledged no leave-taking. Feeling a fool, he raised his cap again, searching awkwardly for the hard, unaccustomed peak. He murmured:

"I wish I could stay to hear more, Miss Shapiro, but I'm late as it is."

"Oh, you'll hear more. You'll hear more. But it will keep for the moment."

"Then I've your permission to leave you?"

She leaned out over the gate and with a dramatic gesture directed him on his homeward path, with the words—delivered in a hoarse shriek—

Your honour calls you hence:
Therefore be deaf to my unpitied folly,
And all the gods go with you!

Guy's hand wandered uncertainly to his cap again.

Miss Shapiro stood motionless, her arm still outstretched, her finger pointing, her eyes fixed upon him. Much discomforted, he left her gate, quelling within himself an absurd desire to break into a run.

CHAPTER VII

THE VISITOR AT THE HOUSE proved to be the vicar, already warmed by a glass of sherry by the time Guy returned. Mr. Wrottesley rose and welcomed him with an overtone of ritual sympathy glossing the natural shyness of his manner.

"I had no real opportunity to speak to you on Wednesday," he said. "Believe me, I feel every sympathy for you and your sister in your bereavement."

"Mr. Wrottesley," said Guy as he poured himself out a sherry. "We are going to be near neighbours. Shall we be honest with one another? My mother's death was no particular grief to me nor even, I should imagine, to Felicia."

The vicar and Felicia looked uncomfortably at one another, as though they shared a guilty secret, which perhaps they did, for both were imbued with the conventionality which demands an orthodox period of mourning for the death of a blood relative however little loved. They were still the allies. No premonition or portent warned either of them that their allegiances would change and that as each grew nearer to Guy they would recede in distance from the other, though both already felt the impulse to admit the stranger into their circle—for their own purposes.

Felicia, despite any discomfort Guy might cause her, welcomed him as an object of devotion and duty, while Mr. Wrottesley was mentally hailing him as an ally in his suit for Felicia. He was disposed therefore to overlook his unconventionality even though he could not avoid registering upon his features the shock it caused him. He recovered himself however and replied with a geniality he only wished for and did not actually feel:

"By all means, Mr. Ritchie. Honesty above all things, I am glad to find you so frank."

For his part Guy was genuinely determined to be pleasant. He wished to know Mr. Wrottesley, to examine the life of a country vicar so that this too might be pasted into his album of souvenirs and he himself, by contemplating it and by testing his own relationship to it. establish his empirical personality.

"You see," he said, smiling in a friendly manner, "it can't be said that my mother was a very lovable person. Whether circumstances had made her what she was, I don't know."

"She had very poor health," murmured Felicia.

"Very patiently borne," added the vicar piously.

"Yes, yes." Guy spoke with a little impatience. "But *was* it so patiently borne? The patience seems to me to have been exerted mostly by my sister."

Mr. Wrottesley felt his sherry glass unsteady in his hand and set it down on the polished table beside him.

"Your sister," he said to Guy, as man to man,

excluding Felicia from the conversation, "Your sister is a *truly good woman.*"

Felicia was displeased. The conversation was becoming too personal.

"Excuse me," she said to Mr. Wrottesley. "Your glass . . . it's a polished table . . . I wonder if you'd mind?"

Confused, the vicar made a rush for his glass. The sherry and the conversation had equally confused him. His rusty clerical sleeve caught the light stem and tipped it over, and a pool of sherry, sufficient it seemed to have been contained in a tumbler, crept slowly across the glassy surface of the table. Guy took out his handkerchief, coolly mopped up the sherry, and refilled the glass. He held it towards the vicar.

"There is nothing," he said, gallantly, "that cements a friendship so well as an embarrassing moment shared between two strangers. I'll tell you an instance of it." (Thus did he establish a club atmosphere and the vicar felt more masculine and more at ease.) "Felicia, now, my dear Felicia, don't fuss with that duster. There's no harm done. Mr. Wrottesley—to our future better acquaintance!"

He drank his glass of sherry with formality and sat down.

"When I was a university student we had one particularly formidable old professor. Poor old man, I think he would have liked to have been on more friendly terms with some of his students but his manner

prevented it. He was excessively shy and his shyness made him brusque."

"How well I can understand that," murmured Mr. Wrottesley, sipping cautiously at his sherry, his eyes fixed on Guy's lively and charming face.

"Once a term he invited about eight of us to dinner, a tremendous dinner, sir, with the most magnificent silver and china and—the professor's most treasured possession—his Venetian glass. He always told us at some point during the meal the story of how he had acquired it and on one occasion, being somewhat bored with the story (which I'd heard two or three times before) I started twiddling with the stem of my wine glass. It was empty. My damned clumsy fingers—excuse my language, Mr. Wrottesley——"

"Of course," cried the vicar, delighted. "I am not that squeamish you know, Mr. Ritchie."

"No? I'm glad to hear it. Mr. Wrottesley, your health!" Guy drained his glass and took up the tale again.

"Well, I broke the glass. It just snapped in my fingers. There was an awful silence. I felt confused and wretched beyond words. Seizing my neighbour's glass, I cried—I'm frightfully sorry, sir, I'd no idea they were so fragile. I was only doing this, sir—and with that I gave the second glass a twirl and it snapped in the same way. Do you know, vicar, I was friends with the Professor after that, used to go round to his house a great deal in the evening to talk with him and

listen to him—at the feet of Gamaliel, as you might say. He was a wonderful talker once he got over his shyness and there wasn't a subject he couldn't argue about from calculus to—to——"

Mr. Wrottesley was enchanted. He capped Guy's story with another describing an innocent prank of his own student days and the two of them went into lunch in a high state of good humour. Felicia was grateful and pleased that her brother was troubling to display his charm to her old friend; Mr. Wrottesley was convinced that Guy liked him and would approve his suit; and Guy? Despite his initial success he felt an uncomfortable suspicion that Mr. Wrottesley and even his sister accepted him only in the role of a privileged stranger and appreciated in him precisely those qualities which stamped him indelibly as the visitor from London and man of the world. Much as a lonely small boy, desiring to break into the closed confraternity of his fellows, turns their attention upon some other solitary and then ranges himself upon their side, so Guy told his audience of his conversation with Miss Shapiro and quite deliberately he included himself among the village habitués to whom Miss Shapiro was the cuckoo in the nest.

"I wondered," he said sagaciously, as though he had endured her presence for years, "I wondered whether we couldn't make use of her."

Felicia and Mr. Wrottesley looked at him with enquiry.

"Dramatic monologues, you know, at a church bazaar or something of that kind."

"She's a little erratic. I always find her a somewhat disturbing element in church, you know, though of course she must come. She must come if she wants to."

"Yes, however flamboyant her religious devotion may be—and her person" (added Felicia with distaste)—"I suppose it is an act of divine grace that such a woman should show herself in church at all."

"Such a woman?" Guy was caught off his guard for a moment. And for that moment he found himself outside the pale again.

"She was on the stage," explained Felicia.

"So are many excellent people."

Mr. Wrottesley came to his rescue. He wanted Guy back in the cosy parochial circle.

"Your sister is a little severe. After all, the stage is respectable nowadays, isn't it? Let us go back to your original suggestion. Could we make use of her gifts? After all, she has gifts, or had them. I understand she was quite well-known in her time. And I have sometimes felt that we have not welcomed her as we should."

"She is not an easy person to show a kindness to." Felicia spoke with the sad resignation of experience, for Miss Shapiro had been often enough the object of her charitable sorties, and had invariably succeeded in turning her flank adroitly and inducing in Felicia an uncomfortable sense of wider horizons denied her,

a vague discontent with her circumscribed lot.

"We are not proposing to show her kindness. Quite the reverse. I think we might persuade her to show a kindness to the village. Perhaps at the next church bazaar—or the flower show—or—or——" Guy searched for a moment in his distant recollections of rural life—"the Conservative fête."

"Are you really intending to stay with us the whole summer then, Mr. Ritchie? The Conservative fête is always our last summer event."

"Oh, longer than that, vicar, longer than that."

"I'm delighted. Really now, I'm delighted. You will be quite one of us again."

Guy was silent. To be one of them again——was not this precisely his wish? Yet he disliked the phrase and was almost tempted to repudiate it.

"What will you do with your time, I wonder? A village is a dull place, you know."

"I don't regard myself as on holiday."

"Well, it will be delightful to have you here. The manor needs a squire."

The vicar looked nervously at Felicia. Would she think his words implied a slight on her management during the long years since her father's death? But Felicia was hardly listening to him. A silence fell upon them. They had nothing further to say to each other. The vicar got up to go.

"I can count on your co-operation?" (He paused for a moment.) "I can come to you as an ally?"

"Over the church fête? Most certainly," said Guy.

"And over many other things, too, I hope, Mr. Ritchie."

"Count on me, vicar. Count on me."

CHAPTER VIII

'HOW POSITIVE HE IS,' thought the vicar sadly, as he walked home in the deflated mood of aftermath. As soon as he left the house his spirits began to sink and any elation he had felt at securing Guy's friendship was outweighed by a deep sense of inferiority and mistrust of himself. He was incapable of judging Guy on his own merits. He could see him only in relation to his own situation and there he had an unfortunate ambivalence. What he added to the vicar's stature by his friendship and (it was to be hoped) support of his suit, he reduced by comparison with his own assurance and equipoise.

Mr. Wrottesley walked through the empty village street into which had spilled some overflow of the somnolent Sunday afternoon atmosphere within the cottages, with their ruddy fires, curtains undrawn and windows tightly sealed. In retrospect, he wished Guy out of the way. Had he not been at the manor this Sunday afternoon, the vicar began to believe he might have opened his heart to Felicia. The thought recovered to his inward eye the calm sculptural presence of his beloved as she had dispensed the sherry before Guy's arrival and he saw himself proposing a toast— 'Felicia, I drink to you . . . and to something more.

Felicia, to our future, yours and mine.' Linked hands. A shared glass. He saw it all and all interrupted by that confounded brother of hers.

Ashamed of his thoughts the vicar scurried up his laurel-edged drive and entered his home. Nodding in one of his arm-chairs, with tears streaming down her painted cheeks, sat Olga Shapiro. It was indicative of her life in the village that she was always to be met with in other people's houses but that few people entered her own. Her personality was penetrative. She sought out but she was rarely sought. How queer she really was perhaps only the doctor knew. Her late profession of actress was sufficient to imbue her with such a reputation in a remote country district.

Even those, such as the vicar, who might by education have been supposed to put a less superstitious valuation upon her character and who were too tolerant to believe ill of the stage profession in itself and in the proper place, could not believe its transplantation into a village to be right or desirable. His sense of the fitness of things was as outraged as if a parishioner had suggested planting a monkey-puzzle over a mother's grave. But living in such a place and thus voluntarily inviting her own ostracism, he was sure she hurt herself far more than she did the village community, and he therefore was disposed to charitableness and pity. Felicia and the vicar were quite at one in this. It was one of their strongest bonds. They fre-

quently spoke of 'poor Miss Shapiro' and did her many disapproving kindnesses.

Never before had the vicar found her actually in his study. Seeing him at the door, Miss Shapiro bowed her head in her hands and uttered, with dramatic force, the words:

"I found him dead!"

Mr. Wrottesley, from long experience, knew exactly to what she was referring. He hurried forward, took one of her jewelled hands and lowering his voice to a sympathetic murmur asked her, "Which is it, my dear?"

"Geranium, vicar, you'll help me, won't you?"

The vicar dismissed his Sunday rest with the resignation and good-will of a true Christian.

"Come and show me," he said.

They hurried to the small dilapidated cottage where Guy had met Miss Shapiro earlier in the day. Seldom had the vicar found his Christian forbearance so strained. He longed to escape from Miss Shapiro's importunity, to shut himself up in his study and brood upon his own inadequacy. To be appealed to like this, to have summoned up in him his sympathy and male capacity to take charge in a crisis was altogether unwelcome. What office would he not perform for Miss Ritchie? Yet she asked nothing of him, and it was only in response to the demand of a crazed actress that he became a man of action.

Bitterly Mr. Wrottesley drew out the cobwebby

spade from Miss Shapiro's potting shed. The rank garden bore evidence of the little use to which the implement had been put. The brown stalks of a few chrysanthemums drooped over the sour grass in the beds, and he was hard put to it to find a piece of earth soft enough to take the edge of the spade.

"Will you say a few words over him?" begged Miss Shapiro, lowering into the fresh grave a tattered linen pillowcase in which sprawled the remains of one of her huge marmalade cats.

Mr. Wrottesley had done it on past occasions, wishing to humour her, charitable and assured as he was of the divine forgiveness which would overlook the petty blasphemy, but this afternoon he felt unwilling to repress his conscience for the whim of another. He started to shovel back the earth without answering Miss Shapiro's question.

"Vicar!" Miss Shapiro screamed. "You haven't said it! You haven't said it!" She scrabbled the heap of earth to one side, and clawed at the inert bundle in the improvised shroud. Her streaming face, now adorned with a deep stain of earth down one cheek, gazed up at him from the tiny graveside. But his own distress was too great.

'I love her,' he was moaning inwardly. 'Can I never speak? O God, give me the power of tongues.'

He looked again at Miss Shapiro's upturned face, convulsed with a horrible exaggeration of grief which terrified Mr. Wrottesley and because of its abnormality

reduced the natural exercise of compassion to impotence. He defended himself against her.

"No, Miss Shapiro," he said firmly. "It would be blasphemy."

"It's that Miss Ritchie," said Miss Shapiro suddenly, with the uncanny intuition of the half-crazed. "You daren't offend her. Dare you?"

Horrified, the vicar started to back away from the flower-bed, his spade held before him in an attitude of defence. Miss Shapiro rose up, earthy and macabre, to pursue him.

"She's been saying things about me—you've been there to dinner, haven't you?—and she's said things about me—said you see too much of me——"

"Miss Shapiro," protested the vicar, "not a word about you has passed between us."

"She's got money now," continued Miss Shapiro stalking the vicar across the ragged lawn. "She's come into money and she'll spend it on the church, no doubt, but only if you do as she tells you. She won't have a vicar who buries a poor woman's only friends, her pussies."

Miss Shapiro broke off to utter two or three short, throaty cries.

"Oh, you've been kind to me, Mr. Wrottesley, you've been more than kind. Sat with me in the evening, and let me do the church flowers. I don't forget that. Those dear flowers. But she's never approved of me. I've always been conscious of that. And now she's

got the whip hand of you, Mr. Wrottesley. Money always talks. She thinks I'm a bad woman, doesn't she, because I was on the stage? A bad woman, a loose woman. She's been putting things into your head. I expect she thinks there have been goings on here when you sit with me of an evening. So she's turned you against me. All right, Mr. Wrottesley, I'll bury him. I'll say the few comforting words over him myself. I'll get my prayer book."

In anguish, Mr. Wrottesley dropped his spade and halted his crab-like progress towards the garden gate.

"I'll do it, Miss Shapiro," he said. "I don't want to hurt your feelings, believe me."

Miss Shapiro laughed bitterly.

"Oh, no, it's too late. It's too late. Go back to your wonderful Miss Ritchie, Mr. Wrottesley. I wonder you don't marry her. Marry her and marry money." And Miss Shapiro laughed again and ran off to her cottage, still pealing with merriment at her final sally. "Marry Felicia Ritchie, Mr. Wrottesley, and marry money!"

The vicar walked home, every nerve in him jumping like a glass chandelier in a breeze. 'Frightful,' he kept saying to himself. 'Frightful. A dangerous woman. She should be locked up.' To such sad uncharitableness did his increasing desire for Felicia Ritchie reduce him. In his distress, he longed to unburden himself of the whole hideous episode and thought wildly of returning to the manor but the recollection of Guy's

assured urbanity checked him. It was sympathy, cosy understanding, for which he longed. He wanted to talk his horror and misery out of him and see it, an almost palpable cloud, to be dispersed in the sun of Miss Ritchie's smile. He did not relish that it should be reduced to minuscular proportions by Guy's sardonic humour.

The vicar found his garden gate open. His heart, already trembling like a compass needle, fluttered violently, agitated by some unseen emotional north. He turned the corner of the little drive. Coming away from his front door was Felicia. The vicar walked swiftly towards her, took her into his arms and kissed her ardently, pressing her to him and leaning himself against her as though half fainting. Indeed his legs were distressingly weak, and Felicia put her own arms around his back, to support his tottering body. She felt her heart-beat quicken and sensations, pleasurable and distasteful, reduced her to inactivity while they fought for mastery within her. Both, however, were routed, like a couple of squabbling schoolboys, by the approach of her severe, pedagogic common-sense. Mr. Wrottesley's arms were still about her: she adjusted herself to this unusual situation. Mr. Wrottesley was upset. He needed her, as people, she imagined, were always needing her. Her response to other's needs was not merely automatic and acutely sensitive. It was, like the best radio sets, highly selective. No matter what else was on the air, Felicia tuned to her

station of necessity with a precision any radio-fan might have envied. She rejected the idea that Mr. Wrottesley had any other reason for embracing her than some mental affliction. She knew the value of soothing conversation upon the distressed and agitated mind and she embarked at once upon an explanation of her presence at the vicarage.

"You left your sermon notes at the house, Mr. Wrottesley," she said, "and as I was in any case going for a little walk this afternoon, I thought I would drop them in. Perhaps there is something you want for tonight's address—of course, I haven't been reading them," she added, smiling at the vicar with a warmth that flung him into further confusion. "I've just slipped them through the letterbox."

Mr. Wrottesley had lost the initiative. He did not know what to do next. He could not stand for ever in front of his vicarage with his arms locked around Miss Ritchie, so he took his hands from behind her shoulders and stood back, gazing at her with a rather fatuous expression.

Felicia had another cure for mental disturbance when conversation proved unavailing. This second, and, she considered, rather more effective cure in stubborn cases was exercise.

"Well, I must get on. The afternoons draw in so early still. Mr. Wrottesley, perhaps you'd walk a little way with me? I'm just going a short trot over the hill and back by Oswaldstone Farm."

Astounded and overjoyed, hardly conscious what was happening to him, the vicar turned and accompanied Felicia out of his little drive. Once out of sight of any cottages he wondered whether he might take her arm but the fact that each of them was using a walking stick made this difficult. He toyed with the idea, pleasurably, and never realised that quite half his pleasure came from relief that he need not suggest it. They walked in happy companionship up the lane and out on to the open down, where a broad green track curled round its steep side. At last they emerged on the top where their path divagated into three straight tracks spreading out like spokes.

"Are you tired, Mr. Wrottesley?" asked Felicia with solicitude. "The left hand one will take us back the quickest."

The vicar took a deep breath of air. He waved his stick daringly at the centre path, crying: "I'm game for the extra mile, Felicia!" and they set off along the track which lay like a parting over the crown of the hill. By this time he had told her of the afternoon's adventures, and instead of steaming up the windows of a warm room and raising his emotional temperature thereby, his distress had spent itself in the crisp air and he felt spiritually cleansed, refreshed and tautened. He had discussed, too, a point in the evening sermon. They had stopped to examine a curiously-shaped stone, hoping it might prove to be an axehead, and they had shared the disappointment of realising that it could be

nothing of the sort. The sunshine had gone. Mr. Wrottesley's legs became weary and had an odd tendency to shake if he paused at all in his walking. He felt chilly under his warm winter clothing. The two of them fell at last into a silence and the vicar's mind began to turn over a problem. How should he take his leave of Felicia? He looked covertly at the tall woman walking beside him with the long, easy strides of country-bred people. Her face was flushed with the walk. It glowed at him in the dead even light which was gradually reducing the hills and valleys on which they looked to a colourless, filmy incertitude. He began to consider Felicia's reaction to his embrace but it gave him no lead, for she had neither repelled him nor responded. This he found puzzling and brooded over its significance. He began to feel de-depressed and uncertain of himself as the edges of all around him lost sharpness and even recognisability, as though the blank unbroken shadow of the sky had fallen upon them. He told himself, with a certain inward trepidation, that he longed to kiss her again. Yet he could not help wishing that this walk would end as others had done with a cheerful good evening, and no more, possibly, than a warm pressure of the hand. He felt a heavy weight of responsibility on his shoulders. Ignorant of her exact feelings for him, he reluctantly faced the fact that the next move was entirely up to him. Mr. Wrottesley did not wish to admit to himself that he had kissed Felicia merely because he was over-

wrought, but neither did he wish to shoulder the burden of having to make the gesture of advance to her when he said good-night. He was wretchedly aware of his lack of technique, still more aware of his lack of claim upon her. What right had he, a poverty-stricken vicar, to behave to Felicia in a manner which could only imply that he wished to be on warmer terms with her, that, in fact, he had intentions? She was a woman of means. He had no right to pursue her. (Mr. Wrottesley's kiss was gradually transforming him in his own mind into a ravening beast.)

'I should never have kissed her,' he cried in anguish to himself.

They had reached his house. In the dusk it looked very forlorn, not a light on, no fire burning, and the curtains undrawn. He stared at it for a moment, hating the thought of his loneliness, longing for Felicia to say, 'I'll come in and make you a cup of tea.' With the certainty that Felicia would go home and make tea for her brother, he told himself that if only she would come in *now*, he would bare his heart to her.

"Good-bye, Mr. Wrottesley," he heard her say. "I've enjoyed the walk so much. I'll see you tonight at evensong."

The garden gate clicked in the frosty air like the tinkle of a stone on ice and Mr. Wrottesley opened his front door and entered the cold empty hall of the vicarage.

CHAPTER IX

AS YET, MISS SHAPIRO had divulged to no one her scheme of producing a village Shakespeare. This was due less to deliberate secrecy or the desire to surprise than to the lack of any very definite plan to impart, for even her choice of play was not yet finally made. The recent behaviour of the vicar inclined her immediately to revenge and sent her hunting with ferocious energy through her volumes of Shakespeare. She dwelt on a scene from *Timon*, with the unhappy Mr. Wrottesley as the tormented Athenian, till a brief perusal of the play persuaded her of its total unsuitability. Her choice changed as her interest shifted among her neighbours. Her impressions of Guy, at the funeral, sent her re-reading *Cymbeline*, and she had hinted mysteriously of her confused intentions during their encounter on the Sunday morning, but a few minutes later the discovery of the dead Geranium had driven all thoughts of a play out of her head. The subsequent defection of the vicar and her fiery thoughts of *Timon* were succeeded by a dreary emptiness, part mourning for her dead pet, and part sheer boredom, for the vicar had not dared to go near her for several days, and secretly she missed him. Though he had, of course, made his peace with her the following Sunday, she maintained for some time a

distant civility towards him, despite her loneliness, and succeeded rather better than she had hoped in keeping him at arms' length.

Some time, however, after this episode, her interest in the Shakespearean project was revived again by the discovery that the doctor was a lover of the Immortal Bard.

"You need more air in here, my dear lady," he said brusquely. "Your cats smell. Whole place smells. An ancient and fish-like smell. I'm going to open a window."

How could she be offended at such a speech? Miss Shapiro was enchanted. *The Tempest*. Of course. Why had she not thought of it before? With the doctor as Prospero and Guy as Ferdinand.

"Can't stay and chat with you, I'm afraid. There's your prescription. I've got me niece coming to stay tonight."

"Mary?" breathed Miss Shapiro, hardly able to bear her good fortune. "Mary?"

"Only got one niece and that's the one."

"Miranda!" screamed out Miss Shapiro in ecstasy. "Miranda!"

"Eh?" said the doctor, wrestling with a rusty window catch.

"She could play Miranda."

"I dare say. She can play at most games."

"Doctor, sit down, there's a good kind man. We must talk it over."

"Now listen, dear lady, I'm late already, and Mary will probably have arrived. I must get back. As it is I haven't been able to get into Weymouth to meet her as I should have liked."

Miss Shapiro was all concern.

"She's coming out all by herself? On an evening like this? Oh dear! Oh dear! It's February Filldyke all right, isn't that what you country people call it?"

Miss Shapiro liked to remind her village neighbours of her superiority as a town-bred woman by foisting upon them uncouth customs and outlandish stage-dialect phrases of which the local villagers had rarely heard.

"The expression ain't known round here," said the doctor with good humour. "Only used in Lincolnshire," he added solemnly.

"Really!" cried Miss Shapiro with excitement. "I am *so* interested in local words and customs. Lincolnshire, you say? I wonder why Lincolnshire?"

"Full of dykes. There you are, dear lady, I make you a present of that one. February Filldyke. Old Lincolnshire for this damned wet weather." He put on his hat and opened her sitting-room door which led straight into the porch.

"Good-evening to you."

"Good-bye dear doctor, good-bye. My word, a tempest indeed."

"Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!" called the doctor and heard above the clamour of the rain, Miss

Shapiro screaming "Brava! Brava!" and clapping her hands vigorously as he splashed down the path in the darkness.

Rootity toot, she played the flute
In a most entrancing manner:
Pingety Pong, she galloped along
On the keys of the grand pianner!

The doctor's voice went carolling down the passage from the surgery to the drawing-room. Then he flung open the door and stood dramatically arrested in the low archway, the fringe of curls around his bald patch standing up round his head like a halo in the light of the hall behind him.

"You're here!" he bellowed. "You've arrove!" and he plunged across the room and hugged his niece.

"I'm sorry I couldn't meet you, my dear," he said, holding both her hands and glowing like a miniature sun into her face.

"You can never rely on me."

He sat down and held his niece against his knee.

"Six months!" he crowed. "Although it sounds a bit like a sentence—Six months, replied his Lordship, Oh! Gawd 'elp my erring son! But you're actually coming for *six* months. God almighty! Won't you have to work! You can drive me on the rounds, and the accounts—heaven help you, wait till you see the accounts. When was it you last helped me with them?"

"I suppose it was three years ago."

"Three years ago? Well, I don't think I've done 'em since."

"Uncle, you *must* have."

"Well, if I have, I've probably done 'em wrong. And we'll read, Mary, we'll read this and we'll read that. Haven't scarcely read a book since I last saw you, either."

"You don't appear to have lived at all, uncle. No accounts, no books."

"I am like the chameleon. I feed o' the air."

"You look well on it, then."

"I *am* well, and I grow fatter and fatter."

"How is everyone here? How's Miss Shapiro?"

"Why d'you ask after her first?"

"I don't know. She struck my childish imagination, I suppose, when I was last staying with you. She used to tell me about all the naughty parts she had acted."

"Dear me. I hope she didn't corrupt your mind?"

"I don't think so. It's sea-green incorruptible, uncle."

"I'm glad to hear it. I've just seen the lady, as a matter of fact. She has some notion that *you* are an actress now and about to play Miranda. I can't quite make out where she got the idea."

Uncle and niece surveyed each other through a cloud of persiflage with looks of the deepest affection. Their pleasure in each other's company was of that appreciative kind occasionally found between two people of very differing ages and rarely possible at all except between those whose emotions are untouched by the

hot finger of sex or the uneasy scraping proximity of close blood relationship. They enjoyed each other, rolling the flavour of their friendship round their tongues like the rare liquor it was. They made no demands on each other and their lives were so widely separated in the normal course of things that when on occasions like this they met for a short while they savoured every moment and extracted from everything they did the finest essence of enjoyment.

The doctor's niece was just past her twenty-first birthday. She had no parents, and had been brought up and educated by a close personal friend of her father. This man, a fairly well-to-do lawyer, was her legal guardian, and the doctor was his elder brother. Her guardian had recently accepted an official post in Africa, lasting three years, and Mary was to travel out there with him, to act as his secretary. As they were not due to sail till the autumn, she had come to Dorset to spend the summer with her adopted uncle, the doctor, with whom she was on far closer terms than with her guardian, whose affection for her held a greater measure of duty and responsibility about it.

"What about your friend Felicia? Don't you want to know about her?" asked the doctor.

"Of course. Her mother's dead. Poor Felicia. I wrote to her."

"She's come into a tidy bit of money. But she's never ill," moaned the old man with mock grief. "Strong as a horse."

"Not a single entry in the red book, uncle?"

"Nothing for a whole year but a paltry cold in the head and a carbuncle on the housemaid's neck."

"Crool. Crool."

"How's an honest man to live?"

"I'll dose her with senna. I'll chop ivy leaves into her salad."

"Mary, I'd be a rich man if you'd stay with me six years instead of six months."

"But seriously, uncle, how is she? Was she upset at her mother's death?"

"Lord bless you, no. Who would be? She made a decent show of mourning, of course. You'd expect that of Felicia. She always was a great one for convention."

"Not black plumes on the horses?"

"N-n-no. No black plumes. But black gloves. *I* went to the funeral."

"You went? Oh, uncle, that was nice of you. That was decent of you."

"*Decent*? You must shake off your school-girl slang, Mary."

"No, but it was. When you hate churches."

"Can't abide 'em. Though it was a lovely epistle. It was a really lovely epistle. Remind me to read it to you."

"I will."

"I suppose——" he looked at her hopefully—"I suppose you still like 'em?"

"What, churches?"

"Yes."

"Oh, I dote on them."

"Never miss a Sunday?" He was anxious, the old man. Not for worlds would he have had his niece give up her religious beliefs.

"Never. I even go twice sometimes."

"You'll go here—to this tottering tabernacle?"

"Certainly. It has nice gargoyles. There's one very like you on the west side of the tower. Have you ever noticed it, uncle?"

"Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian." The doctor sighed heavily.

"Uncle, I don't need to. You are one. How is dear Mr. Wrottesley?"

"Well. Well. He never troubles me and I never trouble him. He's good to my patients in his limited way and that's more than could have been have said for that old devil Majendie."

"Ah, I hardly remember him."

"You were—I suppose you were six when you came to stay here and he patted you on the head and said: 'Well, at least, doctor, you won't prevent your niece from attending divine service, I hope? (He always called it divine service.) Suffer the little children to come unto me.' 'Mr. Majendie,' I said, 'In quoting those words you assume too much to yourself. However,' says I, 'I shan't attempt to persuade my niece either way.' And I seem to remember you

took the law into your own hands and displayed at that early stage a preference for the Methodist chapel."

"Yes, I do seem to remember that. They had such jolly hymns."

Like to an owl in the ivy bush,
That dismal thing am I,

sang the doctor in an unmusical baritone.

"Well, I don't know about that——"

"You've grown out of your Methodism now, eh?"

"I'm good plain Church of England, uncle."

"Good, my dear, but never, never plain."

"The church, I meant, not me."

"Vain puss. Talking of vanity (though I hope you won't see the connection) Felicia has her brother living with her now."

"I know. I've met him."

"You've met him!" The doctor opened his mouth and simulated an astonishment of gargantuan proportions. "You . . . amaze . . . me!" He gave his stout trouser leg a smart slap.

"He came back on the bus with me from Weymouth this afternoon."

"No!"

"He did an' all, uncle. He is like the god Apollo."

"Is he?"

"Exactly."

"Did he talk about himself?"

"Oh, entirely. He is learning to be a country squire."

"So that's it. At last. Every secret laid bare. For two months I've been wondering what the devil he's been doing mooning about here and you discover it in a twenty-minute bus ride."

"He is also pursuing happiness."

"Oh. Has he view-hallooed her yet?"

"I gathered not."

"Astonishing!"

"Do you like him, uncle?"

A sudden chill entered the warm mental atmosphere of the room. The doctor looked at his niece, the veil of banter was dropped for a moment and he saw her as a young attractive female of twenty-one years. He stiffened and tried to adjust himself to the question, like a horse suddenly faced with a frightening obstacle.

"Never thought very much about him," he said, indifferently. Then he gathered himself for the fence, sprang and soared over.

"He's a nice fellow, though. Very pleasant. He helped me to push the Citroen down the lane one cold morning."

"Oh, he's civilised then?"

The room warmed up again.

"*Half* civilised only, I think, Mary."

"Why do you say that?"

"I once asked him how his symptoms segashuated and he didn't appear to understand me."

"Ah, ah. He hasn't had the advantage of a liberal education."

The words, 'I must take him in hand', came to her lips, but she left them unsaid. She did not know why, or why, indeed, the thought had ever come into her head. A bell rang.

"Time for supper," cried the doctor and leaped to his feet. "I told Jenkins to kill a cock, to brew a barrel of bread sauce, to spread the butter over the potatoes like the gold of Midas, and every sprout I selected personally—only those with hearts of gold—like your own, my darling Mary."

He kissed her with sentimental and light-hearted affection on the top of her head and they went into the dining-room hand in hand.

CHAPTER X

"I HAVE MET THE YOUNG VISITOR," said Guy. He took off his coat and handed it to Felicia, who smoothed the shoulders over a hanger for him and put it away. It was one of the many offices which she performed and which he found unembarrassing because they were done clearly not from love of him but from love of duty. To Felicia, Guy was the man about the house whose comforts must be considered and to consider and to serve was the breath of her being. She performed every task punctiliously and without emotion, like a nurse, because she had trained herself to them, first for an exacting father, and later for a sick and querulous mother. Though she could not love her patients, she loved her duty, and the habit of consideration had grown into her until it usurped her heart.

She poured Guy a glass of whisky and, taking out her knitting, settled herself to listen to his week's doings. 'This,' she thought, 'was what the returned traveller expected.' Two months ago she had been stirred by a faint wind of emancipation and rapid dreams of travel, independence, position, had taken shape in her brain, a succession of mirages, another rising up in her mental desert as soon as she had discarded the last. She had jettisoned these faint promptings and finally

accepted Guy's coming without regret. The past week of his absence had only shown her how much she missed the object of her solicitude. With only herself to look after, she had wandered disconsolate in the house and garden, and not even an acceleration in the rota of parochial visits and ministrations had compensated her for the loss of an object of devotion within her own home.

Felicia had found her human contacts disappointing. The brother with whom she had been brought up had left home when she was still in her late teens, and although they had corresponded with each other and she had even seen him on a few occasions, they had never recovered the affectionate and friendly rapport of their childhood, when, although they had been neither inseparable nor exclusive in their relationship, they had at least shared many interests in common and acknowledged a bond between themselves. Their father had died when Felicia was eighteen and Guy twenty-one. Their mother, the member of the family whom Felicia found it hardest to love or admire, had survived to become an objectionable invalid, whose demands had taught Felicia that duty was a fine substitute for affection. This is not to say that Felicia was cold-hearted. Nor was she frustrated and disappointed. For Felicia loved God. She loved Him ardently, without fuss or ostentation. This love informed her whole way of living and her attitude to her fellow creatures. The impulse to serve others did

not spring from her own human, frail, partial and selfish affections. She did not serve or help or sympathise because she loved the unhappy or the unfortunate. She regarded herself as a soldier under God's orders, and performed her acts of service with the same stern and passionate devotion to duty with which she might, in other circumstances, have bayoneted an enemy. She was seldom, therefore, wounded by ingratitude or indifference, for she did not regard as a personal matter the response her ministrations aroused. Rather she felt an indignation on behalf of her Maker whose gift was so churlishly received. Indignation and even disappointment were sublimated into wonder at the divine mercy and forgiveness and into gratitude at being allowed to play a small part in it.

She felt—indeed, she expected to feel it, as though it were a kind of second, spiritual pulse—the love of God acting through her. She was an engine for the distribution of the divine compassion and she experienced an almost physical sense of it coursing through her and radiating outwards towards those whom she served. Yet she was no fanatic. She was not the stuff of missionary or proselytiser, certainly not of saint or martyr. She desired a narrow field and the restrictive boundary of custom and routine. She had recognised early in herself a lack of adventurousness which, though she no longer thought about it, was in fact one of the strongest operatives in keeping her where she was when she became mistress of her money.

Her intuition was sharpened to a fine point by use, and even what she would have described as her 'baser instincts' were harnessed into service instead of being dissipated by indulgence. She quivered like a water-diviner's rod over her field of activity and her sensitive response to need was so acute that she was able to satisfy even those demands which the makers were really unaware that they were making.

When her brother referred to a 'young visitor', she jettisoned without effort her own knowledge of the situation (which she had already received from the vicar) in order that Guy might claim his news as front page.

"Who's the young visitor?" she asked with well-assumed interest.

"The doctor's niece."

"You've met her already?"

"We came off the London train together and found ourselves side by side in the bus."

"You don't mean to tell me that you spoke to a stranger in a bus! What a countryman you are getting, Guy."

"Yes. Extraordinary, isn't it? It comes almost naturally now. London seemed a city of deaf mutes to me after this village. She's a nice looking girl. D'you know her well, Felicia?"

"Of course. She's often stayed here. We're great friends. Did she tell you how long she was down here for?"

"Good heavens, hasn't the doctor told you anything about it?" asked Guy.

"Well, I believe, now I come to think of it that he did say something about a visit of some months."

Felicia glowed with the light of justified mendacity for she had known of Mary's projected visit for some time. It was strange that Guy had not heard of it, but he did not in fact have much conversation with the people of the village, and if Felicia had a reason for not telling him the news, she was not aware of it herself.

"She's here for about six months, she told me. We must have her over a bit, Felicia. She'll be bored stiff in that dreary house with only that damned parrot to talk to her."

"Oh, dear boy, I don't think she's ever bored at her uncle's," cried Felicia. "She adores it here. Roams about the lanes and—and goes birds-nesting."

"Oh, lord!" Guy pulled a face. "Is she one of these boyish females?"

"Well, no." Felicia considered for a moment. "No, I certainly wouldn't call her a boyish female. Of course, she hasn't been here for three years."

"We'll hope," said Guy, "that she has grown out of the birds-nesting stage. You surprised me, Felicia, I must say. I wouldn't have associated her with hob-nailed boots and a bag of birds-eggs."

"Oh, Guy, don't go on about it. Maybe I exaggerated. But I do remember that she found a lark's nest once."

"Oh, I see. That's rather different. She found a lark's nest once. I seem to remember finding one myself once. Up by the stone circle. I am relieved. Tell me some other things about her."

"But you'll get to know her yourself."

"Ah, but that's not the same thing. I want to know *about* her."

"Well, what can I tell you?"

It was a false move. Yet it was a natural one for had he not invited the question? No sooner had she asked it than the conversation froze. On Guy was placed the onus of finding words for what he wanted to know, of framing definite questions, as though Mary were a subject under discussion, to be divided into headings. What was it he desired to know *about* her? He left the questions unasked.

"I'll go up and unpack," he said.

Felicia felt cheated and disappointed.

"But you asked me about Mary," she cried.

"Did I? Oh, she's a school-girl, isn't she?" he said, indifferently. "I'll take her out and buy her an ice-cream one of these days."

He went up to his room and opened his suitcase. Laid out on the top was a silk scarf he had bought for Felicia. He looked at it for a moment, his head cocked on one side. The predominating colour was blue. He shook it out, felt it, refolded it and put it away in a drawer. Into his face came a wary, almost a crafty look. An observer, catching Guy's expression in that one

moment and deprived of any other knowledge of his habits or character which might have broken down the sharp edges of the picture, would have considered it a mean look.

Fifteen years of generosity had not merely expended his patrimony. It had left him bankrupt of more than fortune. He had discovered no pleasure that gave him an adequate return, and no emotion productive of any dividend. His capital had been swallowed up in a series of enterprises, and whether of the heart or the brain, each had proved as rapacious and as ephemeral as the South Sea Bubble. The habit of generosity, though active in him still, was accompanied by little self-gratification. He was apt now to regret his open-handedness. He wished to close the gates upon himself and dam up behind them the flow of his personality till it acquired a force sufficient to generate an active and satisfying life. In returning to Chalbury, he had been instigated in the first place by the simple desire for flight from one environment to another. To escape from his London life had seemed for some time desirable to him but he had felt too rooted in it to abandon it without adequate excuse. His mother's death afforded him an opportunity which he seized immediately. An escape, however, implies a destination and since the removal from town to countryside was obviously a mere change of habitat, it had been necessary for him to invent a spiritual destination if he was to find spiritual satisfaction. He therefore ration-

alised his flight and found a purpose for it in the change of identity implicit in his assumed squiredom. He could have imposed upon rural simplicity in almost any guise, but such mountebank devices would not have given him the security he sought, the stake in his environment. It was not a disguise he was seeking. It was a personality. If the village accepted his squiredom, he would feel every inch a squire.

His pursuit of his neighbours, therefore, was one with his desire to merge himself like an ermine into his wintry landscape. But, after two months, he was not altogether satisfied with his progress. The self-sufficiency of the country world seemed to him a state in which he could not share as an equal. It was a barrier beyond which he could not penetrate, a wall enclosing a secret and delectable garden. Despite his country habit, no one seemed inclined to accept him. Instead, they became awkward in his presence, as though they were endeavouring to trim their craft to his alien wind. Only Miss Shapiro welcomed him whole-heartedly, and, he felt with annoyance, for entirely the wrong reason. She would stand, in the early spring sunshine, at her garden gate, gazing eagerly up and down the road in her fantastic hat. The villagers passing by would greet her, pass the time of day, indifferent now to her daubed face, extravagant voice and gangling gestures. But Miss Shapiro wanted none of their toleration. She despised them and regarded them as bumpkins. She was not appreciated. Where was Mr. Ritchie? Mr.

Ritchie, who came from London, from the world of theatres, and could appreciate her at her true worth.

When he approached she put on an act for his benefit which made the grotesquerie of her usual performance appear a happy norm, and embarrassed Guy into an artificiality of manner which only delighted her and emphasised his superiority to the country clod-hoppers among whom she had chosen to live. In reality Miss Shapiro adored the country and detested the theatre life which had enslaved her for so many years but she would never have let Stockwell know this. Guy found himself appealed to as a Londoner, as a theatre-goer, and even—here Miss Shapiro became slightly coy and naughty—as the Man of Experience. Everything he had wished to leave behind was summoned up by Miss Shapiro's sybilline power until he felt his country tweeds to be a foolish piece of mummery, and slipped inevitably into the brittle, urban way of talking which he thought he had abandoned when he closed the door on his London house in January.

The vicar, though less insistent, and also less evocative of Guy's discarded self, none the less disturbed him by his obvious desire to avail himself of Guy's experience. He adopted when with him a 'man of the world' pose with the implicit suggestion that he and Guy were birds of a feather compelled to live out of their proper element. Thus an uncomfortable artificiality coloured his relations with these two neighbours. Of the doctor he had seen less, and at least at

present he appeared to accept him, as Felicia did, at his own valuation. To Guy, the doctor seemed an amiable eccentric, one of those figures often found in remote country villages, a kind of 'sport' gone wild and over-proportioned, like the trees in the neglected orchards of so many derelict Dorset farms. He wanted to know more of the doctor, to paste down his eccentricity into his country album.

His unpacking finished, Guy went back to the sitting-room. The room was dark, although, outside, a spurious light was evoked by the white mist which washed the foot of the hills like a soft tide. In the dusk he could see his sister, still knitting quietly as he had left her.

"Felicia," he said, "do you like having me here? Is the arrangement working?"

"Of course it's working," she replied. "Admirably."

He hesitated and then went on again. "But do you *like* having me here?" He switched on the light and saw the dutiful affection in his sister's eyes, for all the world like the glow of a stage fire, without warmth, as she smiled at him and laying aside her knitting held out her hand.

"Dear Guy," she said, "you and I have always been the best of friends."

CHAPTER XI

"MISS SHAPIRO IS COMING down the drive," said Guy.

It was the morning after his return and he was standing at the window of the sitting-room, staring at the steady rain outside, which reduced the surroundings of the manor to the grey blurred flatness of an underexposed photograph.

"She is wearing an extraordinary hat. One I have never seen before."

"I hope she has an umbrella."

"She has one. Also a large bag. Perhaps she is coming to stay."

"Why ever should she?"

"Her cottage may have collapsed with damp."

"Guy, go and open the door. She must have seen you looking out at her."

"Miss Shapiro, come in. I'm afraid you're very wet."

"What a day, Mr. Ritchie! Yes, it's February Filldyke this year, isn't it? Now, do you know, I always thought that was a common country expression—one of these rural *barbarisms*, I imagined, but the doctor tells me it is a local *Lincolnshire* term. Lincolnshire, because of the dykes, you know."

"How interesting," said Felicia, taking Miss Shapiro's outstretched hand. "Lincolnshire? I never knew that.

Sit by the fire, dear Miss Shapiro, your stockings are terribly wet."

Instantly Miss Shapiro turned to Guy and entered into league with him.

"Rain in the country is somehow so much wetter than rain in London, isn't it, Mr. Ritchie?" she observed, with bland disregard for the meaning of her words.

"If you say so, Miss Shapiro. Perhaps I am not well enough acquainted with the country variety yet to be a good judge of the difference."

"As if rain were like wine! You've only got to go out in it, my dear young man. But perhaps you never go out."

"He is out a great deal," cried Felicia. "He has a lot to see to on the estate."

"Oh, that!" said Miss Shapiro, contemptuously. "I thought he'd got over that."

Guy made an effort to re-enter the conversation.

"No one would choose to go out walking in this, would they?"

"Only those with a good purpose," replied Miss Shapiro, mysteriously. She lowered her voice and glanced out at Felicia one of those looks intended to exclude, a kind of mental door-shutting or curtain-drawing. She whispered to Guy, though her voice was, like a stage whisper, perfectly audible to Felicia:

"I've decided at last which play it's to be."

But Felicia was not to be excluded.

"A play?" she said, drawling out the word. "How

extraordinary. We were only saying the other evening —we ought to ask Miss Shapiro to produce a play or do something in the dramatic line."

"Really? I thought of this a long time ago, much longer than the other evening. I've had the idea in mind for months. Years, I might almost say."

She thrust her hands into the bag—a kind of hold-all—which she had brought in with her and produced a copy of *The Tempest* and a bundle of manuscript notes.

"I was up late last night with these. My notes for the production. I have the cast here. One moment."

She flung page after page upon the floor beside her until she came upon the one she was searching for.

"Are we to do all of it?" asked Guy.

"No, no, no. It's cut, of course. Mr. Ritchie, you'll be Ferdinand, if you please. Felicia, there really isn't a part for you. Very awkward, there's only one woman and of course Mary must take Miranda."

Miss Shapiro's enthusiasms were very variable. At the moment Guy and the doctor's niece were in the ascendant, the vicar, and Felicia, in her role of fortuned temptress, were out of favour. Miss Shapiro never troubled to be civil to those to whom she took a dislike, however temporary.

"What about Ariel?" asked Guy gently, "Or is he cut?"

"Your sister for Ariel? Too tall."

"Really, Miss Shapiro, I'd far rather not take part in any case."

Felicia was angry with herself but the conversation

had induced the all too easy tears into her eyes and she was hard put to it to speak distinctly.

"Prospero?" asked Guy, wishing to divert Miss Shapiro's attention from Felicia.

"The doctor for Prospero. An admirable Prospero."

"And the vicar?" asked Felicia, recovered from her temporary retreat, and determined to show fight, though bleeding.

Miss Shapiro looked sharply at her.

"Caliban," she said and laughed shortly, in a kind of bark. "I shall take Ariel myself."

She paused to see if this outrageous news extorted a further comment but brother and sister remained silent.

"I must go up to the doctor's house and see Mary."

"Good heavens!" cried Guy. "You can't go all up there in this downpour. Couldn't you leave it for today?"

"No," said Miss Shapiro firmly. "No, I certainly could not. She only arrived yesterday, and the sooner I enlist her, the better. We shall have to go into rehearsal soon."

"Soon?" said Guy, appalled.

"Very soon. Amateurs need a great deal of rehearsal. For one thing, they are always forgetting to come, which wastes time. I have the rehearsals worked out here, too. For the month of March."

She rustled again among her papers but failed to find the one she wanted.

"Perhaps my sister could help you as—as stage manager?" suggested Guy, and added hastily, "under your direction, of course."

"Oh, I don't think so," said Miss Shapiro. "No, I don't think that would be at all possible. Besides, I imagine Felicia will be far too busy this summer administering her little fortune."

"I have no fortune," said Felicia, flushing angrily.

"Ah," said Miss Shapiro. "I might have had a fortune once. . . ." She paused and looked dreamily at the fire. "If I had succumbed. . . ."

"To what?" asked Felicia, off her guard.

"What am I saying?" cried Miss Shapiro, shaking herself as though aroused from a trance. "What secrets am I divulging?"

"Alas, dear lady, none," said Guy, with the artificial regret he knew appealed to Miss Shapiro.

"Wicked, curious man!" she cried. "Another time, perhaps." (She looked meaningly at Felicia.) "It all belongs to another world—quite another world! To you, Mr. Ritchie, perhaps I could open the door so that you might peep within, but . . . no one else."

Suddenly Miss Shapiro felt very exhausted. She had spent her small emotional charge on this scene, in which, she was happy to think, she had established her affinity with Guy and reduced Felicia to the status to which, despite her wealth, she belonged. Perhaps it was enough for one day.

"I think, after all, I will leave Mary till tomorrow.

Will you see me home, Mr. Ritchie?" Miss Shapiro made a regal gesture.

"I shall be delighted."

Resigned, he gathered up her notes, handed her her gloves, and set out down the drive beside her, holding the umbrella above her head. They went through the garden and up the long lime avenue to the church. Above their heads, the black, enlaced branches caught the rain as in a web and distilled it in heavy crystal globules which fell in irregular showers upon them at every other step.

"You must be regretting your exile, Mr. Ritchie," remarked Miss Shapiro.

"My exile?"

"Banished to the country in February. I don't know how a man like you bears it. But I suppose you have a reason?" She glanced slyly at him.

"I assure you," said Guy—whose sympathies had rarely been so close to his sister—"I assure you that I am here of my own free will. The manor belongs to me, and I have chosen to live in it."

"Ah, no doubt, no doubt. But you are no country barbarian, Mr. Ritchie. I see through your disguise, you know. That absurd cloth cap . . . the tweed coat . . . the brogue shoes. It won't do, Mr. Ritchie. Now confess—you went up to town for a week, didn't you, to refresh your soul? To breathe again the scented air of civilisation? To feed your famished mind upon those intellectual pleasures you are denied here—

theatres, books, music . . . ah, how I miss them!"

Guy, whose visit to London had been for reasons quite other than intellectual, was almost as annoyed at Miss Shapiro's conjectures as he would have been if she had discovered the actual reason for his absence.

"I think you hardly know me, Miss Shapiro," he said stiffly.

Miss Shapiro changed the subject.

"You haven't met the doctor's niece yet, of course?" she asked. "The girl I want for Miranda."

"Yes, I have just met her. If you'll forgive me, Miss Shapiro, I don't think this idea of *The Tempest* is a very good one. I don't think, for one thing, that I—that I particularly want to play Ferdinand. I am hardly the type."

"I do not require types. I require actors."

"But I have never acted in my life."

"You will under my direction."

"I doubt if you will persuade the doctor's niece to play Miranda."

"I have known Mary for twelve years. I happen to know that she has always had a consuming ambition to act in one Shakespeare's plays. She has confided in me things which even her uncle does not know, and which you, my dear Mr. Ritchie, for all your powers of perception, could hardly find out in the space of a single interview."

They had reached the church. On the stone seat inside the porch lay the vicar's black, clerical hat,

surrounded with little runnels of water which had dripped off its sodden surface.

"Caliban!" hissed Miss Shapiro with venom. "Ban—Ban—Ca-Caliban! Have a new mistress, get a new man!"

Guy was startled.

"Isn't it——" he began and then stopped. He was making an enemy of Miss Shapiro, he realised, and trembled inwardly at the thought.

"I know what you are going to say—isn't it master, not mistress? Oh, Mr. Ritchie, you won't catch me misquoting the bard without good reason!"

"No, of course not," said Guy hastily.

"And I had my reasons. If you knew what I know."

"No doubt I shall have opportunity enough of finding out," said Guy, with an attempt at his usual manner. "Discovery of other people's secrets is one of the most absorbing aspects of country life, I believe."

"Oh, you've found that out already?" she cried. "What allies we could be, Mr. Ritchie. What it means to me to have someone living here who is *superior* to village life."

"I have no wish to be superior to village life, Miss Shapiro."

"Ah, we can few of us be what we wish."

"Then I shall make it my constant endeavour to eradicate any superiority."

"Mr. Ritchie, are you trying to quarrel with me?"

"Not at all. But I think you wilfully misunderstand me, Miss Shapiro."

He was surprised to find himself wincing at the word 'superior'.

Miss Shapiro took her time to work out her next remark, and delivered it with great aplomb just as she entered her own gate.

"You should get on well with the doctor's niece."

Guy was still holding her umbrella. The gate was shut between them, and he leaned over it, in a somewhat ridiculous posture, still holding the umbrella over her head. She took a step away, and he leaned over still further.

"I always think," said Miss Shapiro, "that Mary is like her name, a little *rustic*."

"Your umbrella, Miss Shapiro," said Guy, holding it out to her.

"She is a dear girl—and very pretty."

"Could you take the umbrella, Miss Shapiro."

"She needs polish, Mr. Ritchie. You seem to want a mission in life—like so many men—quite different from us women, who are just content to *live*——"

Angrily, Guy started to roll up the soaking umbrella.

"If you want a mission, turn your attention to Mary. She needs——" Here Miss Shapiro suddenly grabbed the umbrella, and pushed her face very close to Guy's—"she needs a love affair with a really *experienced* man!"

Guy walked slowly up the village. He did not turn into the manor house but leaving it on his right took

the lane leading out of the village towards Oswaldstone Farm. Along this lane stood the doctor's house. By the time Guy reached it he had made up his mind finally that he would take no part in any dramatic project. To do so would place him undeniably on Miss Shapiro's side and illuminate him in the relentless beam of her conception of his character. The need to humour her made it difficult to refuse point-blank to take part. Some means of diverting her from her scheme, however, would have to be found. It was important to him. He decided to call and tell Mary now of the whole business before Miss Shapiro had a chance to do so and win her over to her side. He rang the front door bell of the doctor's house, and as he did so remembered that he did not know Mary's surname.

"Is the doctor in?"

"Tisn't surgery hours, you know, nor this isn't the surgery door. Did you want him urgent?"

"I don't want him—professionally—at all."

"Well, you'd hardly think to find him in now, would you? It's Mr. Ritchie, isn't it? I suppose you'd not be knowing our ways and times here yet. Doctor's always out on his rounds from ten on."

"I suppose his niece isn't in?"

"Miss Mary's out with her uncle. Driving the car for 'im."

"Oh, I see."

"Did you want to leave a message?"

"No, no message. Perhaps I'll ring up."

"I'll tell 'em you called."

"No, there's no need. No, please don't trouble."

"No trouble at all. Good-day. I'm afraid you've chosen a real bad morning for your call."

He walked back down the lane to the village street. He was certainly very wet. The brim of his hat was sodden, his burberry heavy with rain. He felt disappointed and hardly knew what to do with himself for the rest of the day. He did not ring up the doctor's house. Nor did he tell Felicia he had called there. She commented on his long absence, when he returned, and he let her believe that Miss Shapiro had kept him talking. When the evening came he played piquet with her, and yawned over it. Country life seemed to him, for the first time since he had come back, intolerably dull and stifling.

"A tierce major," he observed gloomily to his sister.

"I'm sorry, I've a quint."

"Felicia, my dear, you can't be sorry. You're going to win."

In silence they played the whist hand. Felicia indeed had won. He pushed over three half-pennies and started to put the cards away.

"I forgot to tell you, Guy. The doctor phoned just after lunch when you were down in the stables."

"How could he? Wasn't he out on his rounds?"

"Well, Guy, really, I don't know his exact movements. I suppose he must have been back from his rounds."

"What did he want? It wasn't about that damned play, was it?"

"Damned play? But my dear old boy, you seemed so interested in it this morning."

"What else can one be in that wretched woman's presence? I've no intention whatever of taking part in it—or letting Mary do so."

"I don't think," said Felicia slowly and carefully, "that you can order Mary's actions for her, can you?"

"Eh? No, of course I can't. I meant, I must see her and persuade her against it. What did the doctor want then?"

"Please don't think me interfering, Guy, but oughtn't you to let Mary make up her own mind about this play?"

"Was it me or you he wanted?"

"You haven't answered my question."

"Felicia, in a moment I shall quarrel with you."

"It takes two to make a quarrel, Guy."

Felicia looked at her brother with her most affectionate and tolerant smile. He jumped to his feet and walked towards the door.

"Perhaps you'll tell me in the morning."

"Guy!" called Felicia, and he paused, half out of the doorway. She deepened her voice. "Guy, what *is* all this about? I'm sorry if I annoyed you." (She went across to him and held out her hand.) "Good-night, if you're going up to bed. Sleep well. You'll be able to talk to Mary about the play if you want to in a couple of days, for the doctor has asked us both to supper on Wednesday night."

CHAPTER XII

THE DOCTOR was on the telephone when they arrived at his house three nights later--Mary welcomed them; while the vicar, whose over-anxiety made him over-punctual, fidgeted in front of the fire. In her desire that her brother should be included in the conversation, Felicia stalled every attempt on the part of the vicar and Mary to keep the conversation going on the conventional lines of common reminiscence, for of course, both Felicia and Mr. Wrottesley knew Mary well and incidents from her previous visits to Chalbury could have provided meat for conversation for some time. For Guy, this well-meant evasion was the more tantalising as there was nothing he wanted more than to learn something about Mary, and it was from her, from her desultory talking, that he wished to learn it. He desired to hear Mary speak, for in what she said and in how she said it, no matter if it were entirely concerned with the memories she shared with Felicia and Mr. Wrottesley, or if it were a disclosure of her future plans in which he would equally have no share, in some way or another if he were watchful enough he might detect some hint of her attitude towards himself. He did not wish to talk, to be dragged into the conversation and displayed to Mary under the lighting of either

his sister's conception of him or the vicar's. He wished Mary to retain of him the first impression she received, when they travelled back to the village in the bus, and before that image was overlaid like a palimpsest by the opinions, criticisms and observations of others, he wanted to be sure that she had absorbed it and even to know what she thought of it.

'Perhaps,' thought Mary, 'I had better not wait for uncle.' She put out the whisky and sherry and offered the company drinks. Guy refused her offer. He thought of the innumerable London parties he had attended at which it was assumed that 'a drink warmed you up', and his desire to dissociate himself from his old life prompted him to refuse this social lustration. But Mr. Wrottesley had already accepted one, convinced that Guy would not refuse and desirous, as his fellow male, of keeping him company. When he found himself clasping a whisky he did not want and the only one of the four with a drink, he was annoyed and frightened.

"Oh, come now, Guy," he cried, man to man. "You're not going to leave me drinking alone?"

"I don't care for it," said Guy coldly and Felicia gazed at him wide-eyed. He realised too late that he had made himself conspicuous and that in a moment Felicia and probably the vicar too would become the showmen he had dreaded and would point out to Mary his true characteristics, for all the world as though he were a horse at a show.

"Why, my dear Guy," began Felicia. (Here it was inevitably and his face stiffened.) "You have a glass of whisky every night."

It might be supposed that she said this out of spite to damage her brother, to present him to a stranger not as he wished to appear but in his true and somewhat disreputable colours. She might have been protecting Mary from the wicked propensities of a roué. But in fact Felicia was actuated by nothing more than the common desire to display an admired possession. Her behaviour was that of the parent whose pride in his son's attainments induces him to brag of them at his club, selecting of course only those which appeal to himself and ignoring the ones which the boy himself most highly values. To Felicia, Guy's refusal to drink—though she herself never touched alcohol and held the strongest views on sobriety—was a kind of disappointment. It was out of order. Men always drank whisky. Something which Felicia could not understand was passing through Guy's mind and she felt as cheated as though a favourite dog had refused to perform a trick to the company.

The vicar felt an equal distaste for the drink he held in his hand, and the patent falsity of his position. An occasional sherry at the manor was the limit of his drinking experience and he feared that Felicia would not, without his explanation, understand the motives which had led him to accept the whisky from Mary. He wondered if the evening would offer him an

opportunity for making this explanation for it seemed to him too trivial a matter to justify a special call at the manor, yet, if it were left too long, it might be difficult to remove from Felicia's mind the unfortunate impression she had received. Preoccupied, he withdrew from the conversation around him and his contributions to it were of the most perfunctory, like the answers of a grown-up engrossed in a book to the importunate questioning of a child.

The doctor came in at last and looked around his little party. The vicar showed his glass apologetically and pattered:

"I hope you're going to keep me company, doctor, I'm beginning to feel a bit of a waster amid this strictly temperance gathering."

"Oh, lord," said the doctor, "drink or don't drink as it suits you."

He drew the attention of the party upon himself quite deliberately (for he was perfectly aware of their unease) with the same nonchalant and quixotic courage displayed by the soldier who makes himself conspicuous in order to cover the retreat of his comrades. He seized his glass, swallowed the sherry at a gulp and asked Mary to give him another.

"You need to have been brought up in a temperance family to appreciate good liquor, Wrottesley."

His piercing blue eyes surveyed the effect of his remark upon the little gathering. The vicar was plainly puzzled. 'Good,' thought the doctor. Felicia was

faintly disapproving. I'll shake her up, was his instant reaction. But Guy? Guy did not appear to have heard his mild provocation. The doctor took a further plunge, prepared in the interests of unity even to make a fool of himself. Waving his glass in one hand and thumping his bulging thigh vigorously with the other, he sang, without overt embarrassment:

OH——
I like to drink of a social glass
But it must be filled with wa—ter,
It makes the hour so pleasantly pass
For every son and da——ter.
But sad is the fix
If the liquors you mix,

Here he fastened his gaze on Guy and compelled him to look at him, Guy's face assuming a deep brick-red of discomfort.

OH (in a shout)
I never do that, Oh, no! Oh, no!

The doctor paused and wiped his straw-coloured moustache.

'That's got 'em,' he thought with satisfaction and winked boldly at Mary. The vicar was the first to respond.

"Such a tragedy," he said, speaking rather quickly, "that temperance societies so often put the most

admirable sentiments into such banal phraseology."

Felicia supported him, to his inward delight.

"And hymns too," she added. "I was so relieved when you introduced 'Hymns of Praise' here, Mr. Wrottesley."

"It wasn't popular, as you probably remember."

'They're off,' said the doctor to himself. 'They're off, at least the vicar and Felicia are off. What about this other fellow?———' he contemplated his empty glass for a moment and then began.

"The vicar's difficulties over introducing a new hymn book remind me of Mr. Maybold's innovation in *Under the Greenwood Tree*. Don't pretend you haven't read it." (He glared at Guy under his gingery eyebrows.) "I know your father brought you up on Hardy."

"But I never liked *Under the Greenwood Tree*," objected Guy.

"Oh? Pity." The doctor dismissed Guy's tastes and proceeded. "At least you remember the book?"

"Yes, I remember it vaguely." Guy recognised the doctor's device and grudgingly admitted to himself that it was working, but like a stubborn horse he was not prepared to answer to the pull of the rein just yet. It was Mary who disarmed him.

"I've never read it. What *is* the story?"

Guy thought that the question had been directed at the doctor and sat back, prepared to listen to his retelling of it, but there was a short silence. He looked up. The doctor was smoking unconcernedly. Mr.

Wrottesley and Felicia were still talking of 'Hymns of Praise'.

"I'm glad you don't use the too literary ones," Felicia was saying. "I think they were a mistake. Shakespeare sonnets and Shelley and those."

She became aware that her conversation had overlapped the other, gone beyond it and hung flapping in the empty air.

"We're talking shop, I'm afraid," said Felicia apologetically. "What were you saying, Mary?"

"I was asking your brother to tell me what happened in *Under the Greenwood Tree*."

"Oh, I think it's such a dull book. I've tried several times to read it and never got very far, I'm afraid."

Guy leaned forward.

"There was a Mr. Maybold," he said," who came as vicar to a country parish, rather like this. He didn't care for the wind- and string-players of the old choir, so he installed a harmonium——"

"And made the new school teacher play it. Draw your own conclusions," interposed the doctor.

"And the choirmen went in a body to see him."

The doctor had been ferreting in a bookcase. He returned to his chair carrying a small red-brown book.

"Here you are," he said, handing it to Guy, opened, and much to his own surprise and certainly to the surprise of Felicia, Guy began to read, his voice assuming exactly the Dorset accent he had known in boyhood.

"We took the liberty to come and see 'ee, sir," said Reuben, letting his hat hang in his left hand and touching with his right the brim of an imaginary one on his head. "We've come to see 'ee, sir, man to man and no offence, I hope?"

"None at all," said Mr. Maybold.

"This old aged man standing by my side is father; William Dewy by name, sir."

"Yes; I see it is," said the vicar, nodding aside to old William, who smiled.

"I thought you mightn't know en without his bass-viol," the tranter apologised. "You see, he always wears his best clothes and his bass-viol a-Sundays, and it do make such a difference in a' old man's look."

"And who's that young man?" the vicar said.

"Tell the pa'son yer name," said the tranter, turning to Leaf, who stood with his elbows nailed back to a bookcase.

"Please, Thomas Leaf, your holiness!" said Leaf, trembling.

"I hope you'll excuse his looks being so very thin." continued the tranter deprecatingly, turning to the vicar again. "But 'tisn't his fault, poor feller. He's rather silly by nature, and could never get fat; though he's a' excellent treble, and so we keep him on."

"I never had no head, sir," said Leaf, eagerly grasping at this opportunity for being forgiven his existence.

"Ah, poor young man!" said Mr. Maybold.

"Bless you, he don't mind it a bit, if you don't, sir," said the tranter assuringly. "Do ye, Leaf?"

"Not I—not a morsel—hee, hee! I was afeard it mightn't please your holiness, sir, that's all."

The tranter, finding Leaf get on so very well——

A gong rang, drowning Guy's voice in its long-drawn reverberation.

"Supper!" shouted the doctor, and leapt to his feet. Genially he shepherded his little flock along the passage into his dining-room, Guy with the open book still in his hand.

CHAPTER XIII

AS HE WALKED back in the evening after the party was over, Guy deliberately turned loose the last rope which bound him to his London life. If it was, in fact, only a token abandonment, leaving him still in the position to return if he wished it, it none the less seemed to him at the time irrevocable, and a necessary and satisfying step forward into a new life. In his pocket was Vera's last letter. He told himself that he would not answer it. She magnanimously repeated her offer (which she had made either overtly or in hints, in several letters after he left London and recently in person) that the door was still open. He might pension her off, as she put it, but she would always remain faithful to him. He would need her. Vera was not an altogether stupid woman. Moreover she had known Guy for some years. She divined, even if not much more than instinctively, that he needed to love in order to justify his existence. A man without a career, without any absorbing interest in life, whose tastes were merely those he had acquired in the pursuit of pleasure, he was only aware of himself as a personality when he was in love. As Guy, the lover, he was successful. For no other reason were women attracted

to him. He had become an amorist because it appeared to be his only talent. It was well for him that his women had never proved more than mildly mercenary. Though his money had perhaps enabled him to gratify himself the more easily, it had at any rate lasted him for fifteen years, and much of it Vera had invested prudently, with an eye to the future.

She regarded his departure for Chalbury as an amiable freak, and she was glad to think of her nest egg, which she intended as much for his use (was it not originally his money?) as her own. She told herself with commendable restraint that it was better he should run after a manor house than another woman and she felt assured that he would tire of rusticity and return to her. Had he shown the well-recognisable signs of boredom with her while he was still in London she would have felt far more apprehensive, for she knew that in the metropolis his only diversion would be another love affair.

But to Guy his flight from London was an escape not from himself but to himself, as he thought.

'Will you take me sailing in the summer?' Felicia had said to him and with an almost childish pleasure he had remembered his boyhood skill with a boat and told himself, that here was the real Guy—the boy in whose ears the hum of the centre-board was music, the boy brought up to country pursuits, who had sold his birthright for a mess of London pottage.

Tonight he recalled the sailing conversation with

Felicia, but only half of it, as he walked with her to the manor.

"I must take Mary sailing," he remarked, and looked up into the sky. "It's a pity it's so early in the year. We'll have to wait a month. But she'll still be here, of course."

Felicia checked the words she would have liked to speak. With an effort she wrested from the situation the pleasure of renunciation. Her faith was a kind of Medusa's shield which turned every object reflected in it to stone. Felicia's inner self was a repository of petrified desires, hopes and pleasures which her immense religious zeal converted into monuments of worldly pride from the rejection of which she obtained a continual and recurring satisfaction, as refreshing as spring water to her somewhat parched way of life.

"Dear Guy," she said, slipping her hand over his arm. "What a splendid idea! She would love it. She should prove a good pupil too. She's a very practical lass."

"Felicia," said her brother. "Lass is an abominable word."

"It's a pretty word," retorted Felicia. "Girl has an ugly sound and what else can I call her?"

"A young woman."

"Oh, she's little more than a child!" cried Felicia.

Guy did not trouble to answer. Despite all the efforts of his sister and the vicar to present him to Mary as he appeared to them, he felt certain that in

some way she had recognised the essential personality which he believed was himself. He fingered Vera's letter in his pocket and told himself that he would light his pipe with it when he got home. The thought of getting rid of Vera by this simple ritual act induced him to slough off even the memory of her by a confession.

"When I was in London," he confided to Felicia in the half darkness, "I lived with a woman called Vera. She was immensely fond of me."

Felicia made a gallant effort.

"I'm sure she was," she said. "Any woman would be."

"She was domesticated," went on Guy, luxuriating in this purgative conversation, and still rolling the letter over and over in his pocket. "She wants me to marry her."

"Dear boy, I wish you would—if, that is, she's a really good woman."

"No, I don't think she's a good woman at all. But she's very fond of me."

"Isn't that an excellent basis for marriage?"

"Not if I am not fond of her."

"But you lived with her."

"That is not the same thing."

Felicia made a desperate attempt to keep her foothold in this precarious discussion.

"Would you like to have her down here to stay?"

Guy burst into a loud laugh. "Oh, Felicia, you are the best of sisters, but, God help me, what a suggestion.

No, I am getting rid of her, finally and irrevocably. If I weren't, I couldn't talk about her to you."

His words floated away in a faint wisp of steam under the cold archway of the limes. He went on talking and with each confidence he felt he was ridding himself, like Klaus, of the crumbs in his pocket, that Felicia was eating them like a bird and that he would never find his way back. But, unlike Klaus, he had no wish to return. He was going to lose himself in the wood and never emerge again. *Isolé ainsi dans un bois noir*. How delightful that was.

"I'll never go back to London," he said to Felicia. "That life is over for good and all."

"But . . . but . . ."

"But what? I suppose you don't trust me. You think this rustication is a passing whim."

"Well, old man, the leopard can't change its spots."

"Clichés aren't truths, my dear Felicia. I'm not interested in leopards. What do you know of their way of life or mine? Why should you assume that I cannot change my way of living—or myself, if it comes to that?"

Felicia thanked the God of whose presence behind that barred, mackerel sky she felt quite assured, the supreme Confessor behind the heavenly grille, that He had endowed her with this gift of patience, more precious to her than more spectacular gifts, and still more that he had granted her an object on which to exercise it.

"I haven't been curious, Guy, have I?"

They emerged from the tunnel of the avenue on to the open lawn. Through the floating mass of cloud the stars peered fitfully, but their light and the light of the hidden moon behind its cope of cloud was sufficient to draw one's eyes upwards in search of them.

I never will be false to the bonny lass I love
Till the stars fall from the sky, my dear,
Till the stars fall from the sky,

murmured Guy, suddenly, looking up at them where they lay like tiny jewels on the ribbed silk of cloud.

Felicia felt the warning fire of emotion and seized the blanket of facetiæ to smother it.

"I thought the word lass offended you?"

"So it does, applied to someone I know. But the 'bonny lass I love'—that's poetic licence. Besides, the word is somehow sanctified by the adjective 'bonny'. I love no one at the moment, my dear Felicia. Do you love anyone?"

"I love you, Guy."

"Now, now, if you weren't so good a woman, I would say that was incestuous. You know perfectly well what I mean. *Do* you, Felicia? After all, why not? If I weren't your brother I might find you attractive. You have a pretty figure. You dress well."

Felicia thought of the vicar's kiss. In this night of confidences she was tempted to tell Guy of it but she

was afraid of his mockery. She kept her one confidence to herself.

"You don't answer, Felicia. Have you a secret?"

"No, Guy, I haven't. I am not *in* love, if that's what you mean." (There was a pause and then she went on) "I never have been."

Guy looked at his sister with a certain admiration.

"What an extraordinary thing to confess to," he said.

"Why should I conceal it? It's not a sin."

"No, it's not a sin—but it's rather unusual."

"My life's not empty, you know."

"Mine is."

"My poor Guy. I would say that *that* is an extraordinary thing to confess."

"What is the matter with us tonight, Felicia? Why are we behaving like a couple of Oxford Groupers? It must be—" he stopped and continued the sentence only in his own mind—'the presence of a young virgin. A poltergeist is among my thoughts, flinging them about like dinner plates in a comic turn.'

Aloud he went on: "It's the night, Felicia. The damned starry night. I won't come in just yet. I'll go on walking, if you don't mind. Don't wait up for me."

He left the house behind him and went down the drive towards the main road.

'Is it possible,' he asked himself, 'that I have fallen in love with this girl, Mary? And is it Mary I love or does she form part of this scene with which I identify myself?'

He pulled out Vera's letter. In the moonlight he could read it quite easily. It was a friendly letter, full of solicitude for his health. But his health was being looked after by Felicia. He had all the domesticity he required.

'I've been leading the gay life since you went,' the letter informed him. 'Went up to the theatre with Bobby last night, but it was a terrible play—*Boat House*. I expect you've seen the reviews, or aren't there any newspapers down in your wilderness?'

He looked out over the fields, their appearance curiously sheeted in the moonlight. Horses stirred near a gate, a metal hoof struck the timber like a shot and the pull of grass brushed softly through the still air.

'She doesn't realise,' thought Guy. 'The theatre was a substitute to me for the life I wasn't leading. This means more to me than a play—and I can have it every night.'

And then there was the final appeal, covertly put, but so clearly implied: 'How are you getting on without little me? You're not being a bad boy, are you? Darling, I mayn't be all that pure myself, but at least I've stuck to you, honest I have. You do believe that, don't you? Somehow it's become important to me that you believe it. I don't seem to fancy anyone else—not yet, anyway! And if you want a bit more of you know what, you come right back to Vera and get it.'

'P.S. Does your sister know about me? *Don't tell her*!'

Guy crossed the road and leant his arms over the

gate. The horses glared at him with wild eyes, moon-startled, shook their manes and shied away as though he intruded upon some private game. He smoked a cigarette, and watched the few remaining lights go out in the village. He was no longer thinking consciously. All he had once felt for Vera and for other women drained slowly away from him, leaving him as bleached as the road and the fields. He remained at the gate without moving, and one by one, slowly the horses returned and stamped and pulled the long tufted grass round the gateposts as though he was not there.

CHAPTER XIV

MR. WROTTESLEY KEPT an envelope in the middle drawer of his desk. It was sealed and resealed with layers of fresh stamp paper, for from time to time the vicar opened it to admit some new secret to its folds. It now contained four slips of paper, torn from the foolscap on which Mr. Wrottesley wrote his sermons. On the night of the doctor's party, the vicar sadly added a fifth. He tore it off the sheet of foolscap rather carelessly, for he was tired, so that the final sentence of last Sunday's sermon also went with it, and the scrap read, rather strangely:

> . . . with me, dear friends, that love is the most precious gift, and now to God the Father, etc.
>
> I do *not* drink whisky.

Before resealing the envelope he pulled out the other four scraps to remind himself of their contents. The earliest one still made him uncomfortable.

Apologise for 'dear brother', was the statement inscribed. The verger, who had little love for Mr. Wrottesley, had not been slow to point out his mistake at the funeral service of Mrs. Ritchie.

The next was rather more obscure: Preferment definitely *not* desired.

This was by way of being a violent mental protest against the unruly ambitions which warred in Mr. Wrottesley's breast, ambitions which he had, he thought, long ago killed, but now that Felicia's money was in question, they were raising their unworthy heads like fishes gaping after bait. He even contemplated a determined application for preferment so that he might lay newly-won honours at Felicia's feet. He saw himself as canon, as dean, even as arch-deacon, returning to Chalbury in a few years time, sleek and self-assured. He would talk over old times with Felicia, probe her delicately about the new vicar, and then he would tell her of his new life in some cathedral city, and describe his quiet, dignified house in the close. He would open out, he would expand, and she would learn at last of his years of loneliness, and his need of her. And as Mr. Wrottesley reached this point in his dreams, he sighed hopelessly over his scrap of paper, and taking out his pencil, underlined it heavily. It had been underlined twice before.

The third scrap was a triviality: Remark on new coat. *Charming*.

Mr. Wrottesley's passion for Felicia was making him observant.

On the fourth piece of paper was written: ?? in name only ??

Mr. Wrottesley looked at this for some time and then screwed it up violently and threw it into the fire. He slipped in his new message, resealed the

envelope and put it away. Then, like Guy, he decided to take a walk. Although it was late, the brightness of the night, and the romantic inclination of his thoughts, drew Mr. Wrottesley into the still, blanched street, where he paused for a moment, uncertain in which direction to go. To his right lay the open down, to the left the scattered cottages of the village, most of them now in darkness. In fact, the pause was no more than a token concession to his will's power of choice. He pretended to himself that he was rejecting the downs as too lonely and chilly, and the village because he might meet late home-comers, but from the moment he put on his coat he had only one intention and one desire—to walk down the lime avenue to the manor.

He went across to his church. The gargoyles along each side of its low roof glared out into the churchyard. The moonlight threw them into even more hideous relief, making black caverns in eye sockets and in the holes of the enormous ears, and picking out like a spotlight protruding tongues, bulging eyeballs, arrays of fearsome teeth. Mr. Wrottesley had never loved this church. He was not a countryman nor an antiquarian. Rusticity held no charm for him, and he found the obscure, exclusively local details of his church's history intensely boring. On the wall hung a placard describing its foundation in Saxon times, its rebuilding in the twelfth century, alteration in the reign of Henry VI, additions in the reign of Henry VII,

with details about its piscina and bells. The sloping meticulous writing was that of the vicar before last. The ink was now faded and almost illegible, the card torn and dirty, but Mr. Wrottesley never renewed it. As for the gargoyles, he found them embarrassing. He could see nothing amusing in the bagpiper carved over the west door, which delighted most visitors, and he found the frescoes inside the church (blurred and flaked as they were, one could still see the gross naked figure of a Christopher carrying a monstrous overgrown child on his white shoulder) simply detestable and regretted that they had ever been uncovered by a zealous predecessor. Yet, as he stood this night in his churchyard, with the ancient lichened slabs around him, some of them tipped drunkenly over their grassy shapes as though their inhabitants were heaving uneasily beneath their mounds, he tried honestly and sincerely to feel for it the affection he knew he ought to feel, the affection that Felicia felt for it. (He had sometimes supposed that it was her church rather than his own.) If he were to ask Felicia to marry him it could only be with the genuine acceptance of his position here. To marry her would be to tie himself inevitably to this rural living. Ambition must be finally trampled underfoot before he made his proposal.

Still more frightening and more hideous to Mr. Wrottesley appeared his masculine desire to possess his beloved. It was a gargoyle as fearsome as that figure on the north side of the tower, mercifully placed

so high up that it seldom excited comment. He dwelt much on Felicia's goodness, he weighed up her spiritual merits and counted the blessings of her religious devotion, her charity, her patient and forgiving nature. Yet he wrestled on his knees with the unhappy conviction that these were as nothing to his wicked heart in comparison with the charms of her person. In this Mr. Wrottesley did himself a great injustice. In a man of his temperament, imagined passion would always prove more rewarding than the actuality. Too warm a response would have stultified him. An ardent wife would have reduced him to impotence, besides appearing to him morally disgusting. So that Felicia's total lack of response to his kiss (while he told himself that he was disappointed and that he longed again to feel her soft downy cheek under his lips) had in fact been a relief to him. He had not repeated it. Only tonight the combination of whisky, moonlight, and a whole evening spent in Felicia's company was proving too much for Mr. Wrottesley.

He started to walk down the lime avenue to the manor. So might we walk, he told himself, Felicia and I, hand in hand, from the manor to the church and back again. So might we walk on summer afternoons and smell the scented trees, and turn away from their warm aisle into a cool, withdrawn path where none could follow. Perhaps it was as well for Mr. Wrottesley's later peace of mind that he emerged at this point of his imaginings into the cold revealing light of the

moon. The clouds had almost gone. Across a stretch of lawn as pale and gleaming as a lake stood the house, the warm brown of it moon-blanched, paper-white. Two or three windows showed flat rectangles of light which threw no gleam upon the trees outside, for any golden reflection was absorbed by the piercing white light of the moon, and the windows shone a dull yellow like brass trays hung on a white-washed wall. It was so quiet that the vicar dared go no farther. He stood as if frozen in a pool of light at the edge of the trees. He gazed up at the window behind which he knew that Felicia must be going to bed. The bell in the manor stables pealed eleven in cracked tones. In the vicar's imagination Felicia emerged from the side door and walked over the lawn as though across a silver sea, drawn by the beauty of the night. He would call out to her and she would see him standing on the dark shore and would run into his arms. Thus etherialised, converted into a white dream, undefined, indeed improbable, desire lost its terrors for Mr. Wrottesley. He crossed his arms over his chest as though he were enfolding Felicia's body within them, and gazed into the face his mind's eye conjured up for him so close to his own. 'How beautiful you are,' he murmured aloud. His mouth shaped itself for a kiss, he bent his head a little, raised his hands to his mouth and kissed them passionately as though the cool dry skin were indeed Felicia's mouth. His eyes closed. He dwelt on this kiss. Every moment, his imagination ran a little

further beyond it, like a thin sliver of wave that creeps up the sand, retreats again, edges up a little higher and still retreats. The undertow of celibacy acted as a powerful brake upon the vicar's thoughts. He returned again and again to that first moment of delight when Felicia would let him clasp her to him, when her head would fall back on his arm and his mouth find hers. But beyond that point he could visualise nothing for his mind, at each glance forward, ran back again dismayed. Beyond, all was dark as the impenetrable cavern behind the vast magnolia tree which kept the moonlight off the bank behind it as though it were the palm of a hand held before the face of this sleeping garden. And as the moon itself crept round the house (and its movement could be seen quite clearly, measured against the chimneys and gables of the roofline) revealing new angles, fresh lines and crevices in the face of the wall, the huge magnolia tree still arrested its beam, and kept the paths and beds behind it in deep shadow. The vicar murmured still the few worn phrases that he always used in connection with Felicia: 'You are so beautiful; How good you are—' when above his muttered endearments came the sound of a footfall. He straightened himself. The footsteps were behind him, in the lime avenue. He could not go forward across that brilliant lawn. He stood like a dark tree, erect and stiff, his face as white as a cadaver, the muscles of his thighs as stiff as bones. Yet it was Guy who felt the culprit. He hurried forward and began

an explanation as though he were a trespasser.

"I've been walking," he said. "Down the drive and round the village, through the churchyard and back this way. Have I been treading on your heels, vicar?"

"No, no," stammered Mr. Wrottesley.

"I am empty," said Guy, thrusting his hands into his pockets and gazing upwards into the field of stars. "You could put into me anything you choose, vicar, at this moment. Are you in a proselytising mood?"

The vicar was silent. He was anxious. He feared Guy was making fun of him. The younger man propped himself upon a stone urn which was one of the decorative features of the garden.

"Tell me," he said. "Why are we always in the wrong place at the wrong moment?"

"I don't understand," said Mr. Wrottesley miserably. His main preoccupation was, had Guy seen his contorted attitude and overheard his muttered endearments? 'There is a wicked madness in the moment. He may say anything to me,' writhed the vicar.

"It's after eleven o'clock and we meet in the moonlight here, like a couple of roving gallants. Yet I am in no amatory mood, Mr. Wrottesley. I'm drained dry. I'm fit for a sacrament. Yes, I've made my confession. I'm ready to receive."

Mr. Wrottesley was horribly taken aback.

"You don't mean—" he began and peered with shocked eyes at Guy. There was not a trace of mockery in his face and the vicar was the more appalled. Guy's

face had the same blank, expressionless clarity as the moonlight, with the same hint of mysteries unresolve. "You don't really want—" he began again.

Guy took Mr. Wrottesley's arm and began to walk him up the dark lime avenue, at the end of which the church stood, clearly visible. Over its ancient stone the skin of moonlight cast a rather leprous appearance. The vicar now began to wonder if Guy were drunk or a little mad. Was he really going to drag him into the church and invite him to give him the sacrament? Surely this would be irregular. But how, the vicar wondered, was he justified in refusing a man the rites of the church if he demanded them, even at an unsuitable time? The irregularity of his position alarmed him, for to comply with or refuse such a request seemed to him equally likely to provoke a reprimand from his bishop. But his fears were baseless for Guy stopped at the gate and did not attempt to enter the churchyard. He leaned his arms over the wall and addressed the vicar at last, after a short silence.

"Have you ever been in love, Mr. Wrottesley? There is a moment, or so it seems to me, a moment before love is declared, almost before one is aware of it, when the realisation of what is happening to one hangs before one like a cloud. You know you are about to be in love, yet you feel nothing. Everything about you suddenly takes on the sharp outlines of this moonlit scene, illumination without warmth. And yet you know that in a mere turn of the world's axis you

will be in a blaze of red light. And you wait for it. And feel emptied of all feeling. At such a moment anything can happen to you. Don't you agree? Every sense is on the alert, a pack of hounds waiting for your whistle. Supposing someone else—you, for instance, vicar—whistled, they'd respond. At least, I think they would respond. That's what I meant about this moment. I could at a call, at a whistle, turn monk, or—or murderer, as well as I could turn lover."

Mr. Wrottesley did not know what to say to this speech, which he had hardly understood. He felt himself to be in love but Guy's words seemed to bear no relation whatever to his own emotions. What or whom did Guy love? There was nothing to tell him. If for one moment the vicar could have contemplated unburdening himself to his companion, it would have been of Felicia not of himself that he would have spoken, of Felicia, whose goodness appeared to him a radiance which stained his drab life as the light from the east window warmed the grey flagstones of the aisle; of Felicia, whose qualities raised her in Mr. Wrottesley's estimation almost to the position of a saint; of Felicia, whose beauty—but here Mr. Wrottesley retreated from himself. Away from the suggestive radiance of that parcel of light which was Felicia's bedroom, he wondered at himself, as though his performance at the edge of the lawn were an aberration. He felt sadly confused. Had Guy never appeared and talked this transcendental nonsense to him, he might

have gone home with the infection of a good courage (the vicar tended to think in prayer-book phrases) strong enough to have spurred him on to a proposal the next day. As it was, he went to bed deeply dejected, puzzled at himself, at Guy, at the universe which had wheeled above his innocent head like a flight of birds, above all in wonder at the now ash-cold fire in his belly which had induced him to clasp in his arms the empty air and press upon his own hand the first kiss his mouth had ever formed in passion.

CHAPTER XV

FOR MARY, the company of Guy during these spring months was an additional delight among the many pleasures of her Dorset visit. Anyone who possesses sleight of hand enjoys the exercise of it, not so much as a display as in the pure pleasure it affords to indulge his talent and keep it supple. So perhaps Mary, had she been inclined to introspection, might have viewed her early relationship with Guy as an exploitation of her talent for friendship. Her own lack of inner questioning led her to accept without private criticism the persons whom she met and her candid and generous nature easily selected—without conscious choice or pious scruple—what was best in them, so that they shined in the light of her affectionate acceptance, and their imperfections were cast into shadow not merely to her eyes but often to the eyes of any others with them. Thus Felicia, in Mary's company, began to find in Guy qualities which she had not discerned for herself, and as she awoke to them, she realised that they were in a sense a rediscovery, for in her childhood she had known of them, even if she had not then analysed them.

Mary possessed the curiosity which seeks to know well but is always ready to pause at the closed door and pass on without comment. She was not indifferent but

she appreciated privacy. Perhaps she had fostered this talent in the doctor's company for he was the most incurious of men. For his part the doctor saw Guy without any of the emotional bias which prejudiced the views of Felicia and Mr. Wrottesley. He saw him simply as a city man who had run through a fairly considerable fortune in fifteen years and had nothing to show for it. This did not, however, raise a scruple of moral judgment on the doctor's part, or even interested curiosity—both of them qualities which entered into Felicia's heart and afforded her exquisite pleasure in vanquishing, the first because she believed sincerely in the dictum 'judge not and ye shall not be judged', and the second because she knew curiosity to be one of her vices and as such a dragon to be pierced. No, the doctor accepted Guy as he was, presumed that he had come to live in Dorset for his own purposes and provided he did not impinge in any way upon the doctor's ordered mode of living, he was prepared to meet him and gain from the contact anything he had to give. The doctor believed privately that it was not much.

Yet it was inevitable that his view of Guy should come to be modified by his niece's opinion and as he himself met Guy very seldom, he took Mary's word for it that he had qualities which he himself had not perceived, and was glad that she took pleasure in his company. In the first four weeks of their acquaintanceship he was hardly conscious of how much Mary saw of Guy, for she rarely spent with him time that she

could spend with her uncle. Both of them lived entirely in the present. For Mary, having so small a parcel of the past to carry (since she was only twenty-one) this was not difficult, but perhaps, even so, there was more in it than the mere insouciance and optimism of her age. The close bond between her and her uncle which had existed ever since she was orphaned as a very young child, could hardly have failed to influence her, and the habit of regarding each day as a new birth was one which he undoubtedly had planted in her. He was unencumbered by events. His practice of forgetfulness allowed him, almost invariably, to present to those who knew him, a face as fresh as a new-washed shore, from which the debris of the day before has been swept by the tide. And in this Mary was very like him. Because of her essentially integrated nature, she was perhaps more without design than other girls would have been, for, being aware of no gaps in her mental or emotional content, she was not prone to longings, hopes or discontents. She took an unaffected, open and quite unsubtle pleasure in Guy's companionship. She had the inestimable advantage of whole-heartedness. She was in love so comprehensively with life itself that she could not at this stage have narrowed down her all-embracing passion upon one person. And the very comprehensiveness of her embrace made it possible for her to live permanently in a state of rapt enjoyment, for she was never without a person or an object upon which to lavish the generous appre-

ciation of the goodness of life which filled her heart.

At first, Guy appeared to her exactly as he would have wished. She detected in him no trace of his London life or habits. She accepted him as part of Chalbury and enjoyed his company the more because she could share with him her pleasure in the countryside with which each of them was renewing their acquaintance. "If you have once lived in a place, and return after many years," said Guy to her on one occasion, when they were walking together over the hills, "you find yourself in the position of a lover who suddenly discovers himself to be in love with someone he has been familiar with for years—some childhood friend, perhaps. Hitherto he has not only taken her for granted but even ignored her. And so, as he falls in love, instead of finding out all sorts of unexpected things about her, he finds all the things he has known already but never recognised for what they were. Which is in some ways more exciting."

"You have the advantage of me," said Mary. "I've no experience."

"But like me, you've come back here after being absent for a long time."

"But not such a long time, and it simply seems like coming home."

By now, for he had known her for nearly two months, Guy was finding Mary's unquestioning enjoyment of all she did like a smooth polished surface, in which everything was reflected but nothing remained, and he

felt a desire at times to disturb the image, to surprise, almost to throw a stone at the glass to provoke or shock her into saying something which would reveal her feelings for him in particular rather than for the world in general. She was so absorbed in everything she did that she became for a period of time a kind of vehicle for it.

"Let's stop for a moment," he had said on that occasion and sat down on one of the dry stone walls that ran like loose-knit ropes across the sides of the hills. He looked down across the road along which the bus had travelled from Weymouth with him sitting beside her, their first meeting. How had she appeared to him then? 'The young visitor,' he had described her to Felicia, and so she had seemed, preoccupied with matters of luggage and with an eager recognition of each landmark, as though she were ticking off on an inventory a list of belongings. How different he himself had felt on his return, when the sight of the elms, massed like sails above the January evening mist, had been a sight remembered but not an emotion recaptured.

"You must have a—a faithful nature," he said suddenly.

'I've not lived long enough to find out," she answered indifferently. She did not ask him why he had said this and he felt almost exasperated at her lack of interest. He pursued his point.

"You don't live here, yet you return here and your

love for it is so unchanging that it costs you no effort of readjustment."

Had Guy but known it, he was building up in Mary's mind precisely the picture of himself which he would most have wished to conceal. He spoke of love and she was reminded of his seniority and his to be assumed experience. He used the word 'faithful' and something in the tone of his voice told her that the word had little meaning for him. She was inwardly disturbed and so she used the one weapon she was familiar with, indifference. She did not wish to know about Guy's inner feelings and thoughts. And yet, because she was the one thing he found here which was totally new to him and which he desired to know, he was compelled to reveal himself in the pursuit, stripping himself as though he were a runner. He recalled the second occasion of his meeting her, at the supper party. "I enjoyed that evening at your uncle's," he had said afterwards. "I like him so much." And Mary had thawed a little. She had turned to him, about to respond to this theme which she felt she could share with anyone, when by a superfluous addition he had drawn the subject back upon himself: "He is the one person here who does not emphasise my strangeness in this rural community."

Then Mary had laughed at him. But now she was beginning to be more more and more aware that, behind the façade she saw, was another person and that the more she was drawn within his orbit, the clearer

would this figure become to her and she felt no desire to penetrate below the surface of a personality, any more than she looked for more from life than she could see with the naked eye. For her, these were walks through country she found beautiful and satisfying. She would have enjoyed them perhaps even more by herself. But having met Guy she was perfectly willing to have him as a companion, thinking that he too would obtain from them an enjoyment comparable with her own. When she sensed that for Guy the importance of the walks lay in herself and not in the landscape, this disturbed her pleasure.

"Let's walk on," she suggested when he turned the conversation upon himself, and they rose. And this was always to be the burden of her response: 'Let's walk on,' as though she would by a kind of perpetuum mobile prevent the crystallisation of their relationship.

During these first two months many of the meetings of Guy and Mary took place at the manor. Felicia would invite Mary to tea; they would sit and talk, mostly of Mary's doings and of her plans for the future, for Felicia was a well-trained listener and a past-master at putting just those questions which everyone yearns to be asked. After tea, Guy would come in. He took his squire's duties seriously and spent several hours each day training himself for the part of a country gentleman by walking round and round his small estate. At once the conversation went out of focus as it does when three people are talking at cross-purposes.

"Mary has been telling me," was the usual opening of Felicia's remarks.

"Pouncy (the bailiff) has been telling me . . ." was a frequent opening gambit of Guy's.

And Mary would reply to both and comment on both with an adroitness in which there was a touch of amused vanity, for she liked to see how long she could keep the two balls of conversation in the air. Inevitably, she dropped one in the end, and it was usually Felicia's. Then Felicia would become silent, and smile on her brother and her friend, enjoying with her buttered tea-cake the pleasure of having effaced herself, which was as precious to her as the ointment which ran down the beard of Aaron. It was a sensation of which she was soon to find she had almost a surfeit for Guy contrived to monopolise Mary more and more. His work on the estate was not sufficient to keep him away from the house for long. He took to coming back for afternoon tea, whether Mary was there or not.

Felicia began to value Mary's company the more as she saw less of her, and she felt almost ashamed of her pleasure when Mary came over to the manor just before Easter, when Guy was away for the evening at Weymouth. Felicia was much addicted to the observance of old country customs. On All-Hallows E'en the house reeked with the spicy smell of gingerbread, apples bobbed in china bowls, buns dangled from strings, and shy, red-faced village boys and girls were put through the traditional antics. On Christmas Eve, the kitchen

was given over to the making of mince pies. On the dresser stood several small baskets, and Felicia would line each one with a clean white napkin, the corners of it emerging like ears over the wickerwork. In went four mince pies, and an egg in the centre—a brown one. Felicia subscribed to the belief that a brown egg tasted better than a white one. These baskets she delivered personally to the aged of the village. Easter gave her a further excuse for the exercise of her charitable faculties. She baked innumerable Easter cakes, curranty and spiced, and three of these, with an egg or two, went into the little wicker baskets, to be deposited at the doors of the deserving poor. It was this very evening, the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Day, that Mary called, and was pressed to stay to supper and assist Felicia in her labours. It was a slow business, for only a few of the offerings could be carried at a time, packed into a large fruit basket. It was a cold Easter; the evening was grey and the light shallow, washing so tenuously round hedge and tree that it threw no shadows beneath them. Mary and Felicia set forth in the dusk. They did not knock at the cottage doors. The baskets were just placed on door steps and they hurried away, a couple of conspirators in charity.

Felicia enjoyed her evening immensely. She was able to tell Mary the history of each family they visited and this was a great pleasure to her for she really had little opportunity to talk of what interested her to anyone except to the vicar. They had to return to the house

twice for fresh supplies, and as they went slowly back after the last basket was delivered, Felicia felt a sadness. She would have liked to tell Mary of it, but it was incommunicable. To speak of it would have required that she should translate emotion into words and this Felicia could not do. She had no vocabulary. As they walked silently arm in arm up the drive in the darkness, they saw the lights were on in the garage.

"Guy is back," cried Mary.

They saw his figure silhouetted against the light as he stooped to push home the bolt. Then the light went out and he was lost in the general darkness.

"Guy! Guy!" called Mary. They heard his footsteps over the gravel and then his form showed black against the paler grey of the lawn.

"Trespasser," he said, "what are you up to?"

"We've been dispensing charity," answered Mary, speaking for both. She unlinked her arm from Felicia's and moved towards Guy. There was a moment of silence.

"Are you with Felicia, then?"

"Yes, Guy, I'm here. We've just been taking round the Easter cakes."

"Ah. Little sisters of the poor. Hand in hand heavenward."

The two women came across the lawn and he found himself between them. He took an arm of each and began to guide them to the front door.

"You must be very tired," he said solicitously, "and I had the car. Come along in and we'll give you a drink.

Felicia, my dear, your Lady Bountiful excursions are over-arduous."

Despite the brotherly arm through her own, Felicia was disappointed. The special quality of the evening evaporated and she felt herself again the devoted parish worker, always a giver, it seemed, and never a receiver. For a few hours she had been someone whose company was sought out, whose conversation pleased, whose affections were evoked and reciprocated—a state of affairs unusual enough for Felicia to feel a passing dissatisfaction with her general routine.

When Guy drove Mary back to the doctor's house, Felicia sat, idle for once, and listened to the dismal crying of the owls in the lime avenue with an almost indulgent melancholy.

"Guy," she said, when he came in. "Talk to me. Tell me about your evening. I—I need cheering up."

He looked at her curiously.

"You, too?" he said.

"What do you mean? Did Mary need cheering up? Why, I thought she had so enjoyed the evening."

Felicia felt tears come into her eyes. It was too much.

"No, no." Guy was scowling at her, exasperated at her mood. "No, nothing to do with Mary. I was speaking of myself."

Brother and sister looked at each other angrily, locked in an incommunicable misery. Then Felicia's long training came to her rescue.

"You go on up to bed, old boy," she said, kissing him good-night. "I'll bring you some Ovaltine."

She walked quickly from the room and down the cool dark hall towards the kitchen, her hand already extended, her fingers curved, for the soothing, practical handle of the milk saucepan.

CHAPTER XVI

AMID THE SEVERE TRAPPINGS of Mr. Wrottesley's study it would have been difficult to disturb the calm. It was not cheerless, but its austerity struck one in the face like the palpable slap of wind up a Weymouth back street, and perhaps the more heavily because it was as unexpected. The vicarage was a warm stone building with a slate roof, lying amid trees close to the church. The casual passer-by would have seen a vicarage lawn, shaded by two giant cedars, and visualised without effort a plump vicar's wife dispensing tea to her daughters and their flannelled swains, fresh from battle on the vicarage tennis court. But there was no wife, no party, no paraphernalia of racket or even of croquet mallet. Within the comfortable golden carapace of stone, the rooms were closed, except for the three or four required by the vicar, and these were furnished with the deliberate asceticism which he had adopted zealously in his younger days, and which now puzzled and troubled him, a habit whose virtue he was no longer sure of. Had the vicar's study been an actual cell, in a real monastery, perhaps its very stones and whitewash would have breathed the life of the spirit and assisted its inhabitant to subdue the lusts of the flesh. But like its owner, this study wore its asceticism

uneasily, and instead of drawing spiritual comfort and strength from the bareness of its walls and floor, Mr. Wrottesley, in his moments of conflict, found them only a thorn in the flesh, a reminder of his own weakness and back-sliding, and as though a cloak were slipping off his shoulders leaving him naked, he petulantly shrugged his room round him and found its threadbare, spurious monasticism very cold comfort.

The most its austerity could effect was a damping down of the timbre of any feeling, producing even in a quarrel a thin *una corde* tonelessness. For these four walls had actually witnessed a quarrel, or something very like one. Thus on a late April evening:

"Mr. Wrottesley, I do not want thanks."

"But, my dear Felicia, how can I help thanking you? Would you have me so ungracious?"

"I should not regard it as ungracious."

"But I should."

"It is a gift to the church and not to you."

"Felicia, that is unkindly put."

"It was not meant unkindly. But I don't expect or wish to be thanked for doing what is only my duty."

Mr. Wrottesley sighed. "Duty is so seldom done these days that one must needs be grateful for it."

But Felicia was not to be diverted. Generosity was a private pleasure to her, a vice perhaps, but to have it recognised put it on an entirely different basis. Gratitude weakened the strength of her charitable solution. She would have welcomed, almost, a callous disregard

of her Easter offering, as affording her a greater opportunity for self-immolation. On this occasion she was the more sensitive to the least irritation because the actual presentation of her cheque brought to an end this period of private pleasure. As a secret drinker who has taken the pledge might be brought to anger by the well-meaning congratulations of friends, which only serve to remind him of what he has lost, so Felicia, who had, two months before, written this cheque and post-dated it, and gloated over it in secret ever since, now felt on parting with it that she wished to hear nothing more of her generosity. The more the vicar thanked her, the more he wondered and exclaimed over its magnitude—for it was for two hundred and fifty pounds—the more severely did Felicia eye it as it lay on the desk between herself and Mr. Wrottesley.

"For the heating," the vicar murmured. "What a difference it will make to us all here to have our place of worship really well-heated at last."

"What a difference it will make to the church," observed Felicia tartly.

"Yes indeed—those dreadful green markings, those horrible fungi—perhaps we shall get rid of them at last."

"I hope we shall, Mr. Wrottesley. It is done now. May I beg you not to refer to it again?"

"Dear lady," said Mr. Wrottesley, almost with gallantry. "The warm air of our church will breath a permanent reminder of your goodness."

Felicia was silent. She started to put on her gloves. Her annoyance had flushed her usually pale face, and the vicar looked at her and found her beautiful. His emotions—not specifically for Felicia, but in general—were sensitised and set a-jangling like an æolian harp in the wind. The sight of the cool, inaccessible but desirable Felicia so close to him synchronised their discordant twanging to a harmony of adoration.

"Felicia," he said boldly and came round the side of the desk. "Felicia, do you remember the night we—after I buried Miss Shapiro's cat?"

Alas for Mr. Wrottesley. This prelude was his undoing, for his timorous impulses, once having marshalled themselves behind its portentous façade refused to come out. There was a silence. Felicia broke it politely.

"How cold it was, that night," she said. "We had the best of the day walking."

Having finished pressing the poppers upon her leather gloves, she picked up her umbrella and walked to the door. Mr. Wrottesley knew that his moment was receding from his grasp. In desperation, he called his envelope of jottings to his rescue.

"Your coat," he said, and reached out his hand as though he would have stroked its smooth nap, but he left the gesture uncompleted, a mere wraith of smoke hanging in the air. "Your coat," he continued with an effort. "Such a pretty one, Felicia. So becoming . . . *charming*." He ended with an effort.

"Mr. Wrottesley," said Felicia, severely, and opened the door. "Mr. Wrottesley, I *cannot* believe that you have never seen it before. I bought it for Mr. Majendie's funeral—twelve years ago, was it he died? *You* should remember, surely."

Mr. Wrottesley's voice followed feebly after her as she walked firmly down the hall.

"It's the eternal cry of woman—we men never notice anything, do we?"

But she would not be drawn. Not for the first time, she felt uneasy, almost apprehensive at the intrusion of Mr. Wrottesley the man upon Mr. Wrottesley, the vicar. If he needed her, that was another matter. Certain of her well-trained, well-principled, moral muscles came into play in ready response. But this evening his masculinity was—however faintly—assertive. She did not like it.

"Good-night, Mr. Wrottesley," she said. "A happy Easter to you."

Mr. Wrottesley returned to his study and buried his face in his hands.

'It is my punishment,' he cried in anguish. 'It is my punishment for the vicious desires that have arisen in me and are destroying me.'

He paused. The words had been prompted by habit, by his imbued sense of duty and the long years of devotion to his celibate ideal. They sounded to him now rather histrionic and he was embarrassed at his own cry. His sense of wickedness vied in his heart with

his consciousness of wounded pride; his self disgust was hard put to it to compete with his self pity. For why should he be treated thus, he asked himself. Was he a beast—a bear—to be thus repelled? A horrible suspicion of his ultimate unlovableness fretted the tenuous cord of his masculine pride. If Felicia, so beautiful, and so long his friend and confidant, Felicia who knew him so well and had seemed, if not to love him, at least to regard him with affection, if she made so cold a response to his advances (and in Mr. Wrottesley's mind these appeared very bold indeed) then in whom would he ever kindle the answering spark? For Mr. Wrottesley needed love. If it were not Felicia—though this he would not have admitted—it would have to be some one else. But there was no one else among Mr. Wrottesley's slender acquaintance who could possibly be viewed in the light of a wife. Nor with any other woman would he have this long period of slowly-ripening friendship. He had not the capacity to carry off a lightning wooing. In theory he had the best of opportunities for endearing himself to the woman of his choice, or perhaps it would be truer to say, to the woman whom fate had chosen for him. And yet he was no nearer making a proposal. He was not as dishonest with himself as many people are. He knew that it was not Felicia's money or position which was the real stumbling block. Unhappily for himself, Mr. Wrottesley knew where the fault lay, and the knowledge only added to his sense of inferiority. A little

self-deception would have been a great help to him. But Mr. Wrottesley knew. And out of his self-knowledge came the ineluctable certainty—he must be unlovable.

There is, however, an unwillingness on the part of the human spirit to grovel for long on the lowest levels of its habitat. Even the most pusillanimous and enfeebled will usually makes some endeavour to clamber out of despond on to the bank. Mr. Wrottesley began to recover, sufficiently at least to brood over ways and means once more. How was he to approach her? He had felt after that momentous evening when he kissed her that his suit had been greatly advanced. Despite her failure to make any subsequent reference to his action, even in disapproval of it, he had thought of that kiss as a seed sown in Felicia's heart, growing unseen and gaining strength, so that at some later date, he would find it a flower ready to his hand. 'But,' he thought sadly to himself, 'it must have died,' and he felt too discouraged to sow it again. However, as long as he was still uncertain as to her attitude towards him, his hope was not yet entirely extinguished. Rather than attempt such an equivocal act as an embrace again and risk thus a definition of Felicia's feelings towards him, he considered once more the possibility of testing them by means of some conversational gambit. 'For perhaps,' he thought as he sat in his study in the cool night air, 'perhaps that kiss meant something to her after all, and it is only my more recent approach that has been wrong.

Perhaps it is I who have disappointed her.'

He drew out his envelope and broke the seal of stamp paper. The words on the first scrap glared accusingly into his startled eyes:

I do *not* drink whisky.

He felt a stab of remorse. That was it. He had failed her. He had raised her womanly hopes by that kiss, only to dash them again to the ground by his beastliness on the night of the party. Mr. Wrottesley extracted the second scrap.

Praise her new coat.

There he had failed too. How crass, how idiotic had been his clumsy appraisal. 'Woman,' thought the vicar, recollecting that he lived in the country, 'woman is like a delicate-mouthed filly. She requires sensitive handling. I have behaved like a vulgar brute.' He tore up the note and dropped it in his wastepaper basket. The note about the whisky he folded very small and slipped into his pocket-book.

The telephone bell rang and Mr. Wrottesley picked it up timidly.

"Yes?" he whispered, dreading he knew not what.

"Your part?" screamed Miss Shapiro.

"Yes?" said the vicar again, dazed.

"Your part! Vicar! Have you learnt it?"

"No, not yet," said Mr. Wrottesley bleakly and replaced the receiver.

CHAPTER XVII

GUY, SITTING UPRIGHT beside Mary, looked over the same scene as he had viewed in January on the day of his mother's funeral. Now it was June and he had been in Dorset for six months. The hills on the far side of the bay were clothed in an opalescent haze which hung sensuously upon the breast of the sea like a fold of drapery. The town glittered, not with the sharp, frosty sparkle of January when the lights went on in the grey evening like sparks struck from a roadside flint; now it was the windows behind the curving esplanade which flashed in the sun, enhancing by their warmth and brilliance the deep blue of the water and the varied colours of the cliff line. He felt towards the scene before him almost a sense of gratitude. No longer cold and withdrawn, it invited and beckoned, it offered itself, calmly and humbly for his delectation. He felt himself enriched and turned to his companion to offer her a share in his pleasure. But Mary lay back, quite content to watch his face.

Beneath her shoulder she felt the hard pressure of a stone, and shifted herself lazily, stretching her limbs like an animal in the sun, and working her body into the tufted grass till she found a form which fitted her. When she laid her head back, the coarse grass con-

cealed it. Guy had to lean almost over her to see her face and she looked up into his, screwing up her eyes as though he were the sun. He presented to her vision something new and Mary was of a spirit which absorbed itself readily and easily in a fresh experience, swam in it like an embryo growing by what it feeds upon, but possessed all the same of an inner potential which made it as unlikely that her fundamental character would be changed by the contacts she made or the experiences she underwent as that the acorn would grow into an ash merely by planting it in an ashgrove.

She was not detached or indifferent in the ordinary sense. She would give herself completely to an experience or an interest or an emotion, and this was perhaps the easier for her because she was her own to give. Her self-possession was evident in everything she did and her enjoyment of life sprang from this. Whatever person or place she loved, she threw herself wholeheartedly into the experience, yet always, like a swimmer, she could shake off in an instant the element in which she had been immersed, and like a swimmer too, she was not submerged or swamped but allowed that element to carry her and bear her forward. She remained herself, uninfluenced except by those aspects of the beloved which she deliberately chose to adopt as her own.

This integrity, for such in effect it was, was not of that pharasaical kind which implies a slight or even a downright condemnation upon the characters or

lives of others. It was, on the contrary, an unthrift, avid and almost sensuous enjoyment of all she came across, coupled with an apprehension as swift and vivid as a bird's and as selective as the most delicate instrument. She enjoyed every moment she spent with Guy but she made no demands on him. If he did not suggest a meeting, she enjoyed herself in other ways. She accepted him as a whole. If he bored her, she looked at the downs around her, at the hollow scooped out as though with the heel of a boot, and streaked with long yellow stripes of biting stonecrop, as though veins of gold ran from end to end of its green concavity.

And Guy did bore her frequently. He was didactic and he was critical. He seemed to her sometimes to lack a sense of humour. Yet he treated her as the young men of her own age did not, with a consideration and a slightly mocking gallantry which pleased her. The relationship between them lacked the bonhomie and hearty boisterous rapport she enjoyed with boys in their twenties whom she knew at home, with whom she played tennis and danced. Her friendship with Guy was slightly uncertain, a hand delicately feeling for a switch in the dark, and although she was not given overmuch to speculating about it, she was aware of her own expectancy, of a sense that their relationship could not stand still and was, like the tremulous point of a compass, coming to rest in a position she recognised as inevitable though its direction was for her unexplored.

Now as she lay looking up at him in the June warmth,

silent (for neither had spoken for some minutes) relaxed and receptive, she felt a sudden tautening of the loose fibres of their unexpressed emotions, as though in the sea of air about them some invisible current were drawing them up into an eddy. For a moment she was conscious that she was holding her breath and reaching out her arms, and like a diver who opens his eyes in the moment when the surface of the water is just above him, and sees the sun's brightness as a glow diffused through the thin green world above his head, so Guy's face appeared to her as a cloud of brightness above the viridian screen of grasses, a glow of light to which she aspired and into which she emerged only to be absorbed.

The passion with which she kissed surprised out of him a lingering scruple he had forced himself to observe hitherto. Her youth, which had been a barrier, a moral fence to which he had been unwilling to put his horse, this youth with its companion inexperience and ardour inspired in him a tenderness unevoked by the practised embraces of his London mistresses. Something of the wonder of the traveller whose heart is lifted by an unfamiliar view of some often visited tower or church, filled him as he kissed her. Her lips trembled a little under his mouth and then she put her hands round the back of his head, parted her lips and pressed his face against her own with ardour. She made love with an innocent and instinctive pleasure. Because Guy's experience precluded the fumbling experimentalism which marks most youthful love affairs, they found

themselves perfectly happy in one another—she in his practised love-making—which to her had nothing of the amorist about it for she knew no other with which to compare it—and he in her naïvely responsive pleasure.

"Are you not afraid," he whispered, "that I shall take an unfair advantage of you?"

They lay back exhausted after their kisses.

"I wouldn't let you," she answered lightly.

"Can you say to the sea, thus far and no farther, and here shall thy proud waves be stayed?"

"Maybe not to the sea, but to you—yes."

"To me, yes," he repeated and leaning on one elbow, looked down on her. "You are a very strong-minded young woman, aren't you?"

"I never gave it a thought."

"Doesn't it occur to you that I shall want rather more than you have just given me?"

"Oh, Guy, you talk too much."

She rose easily from her bed of grass and held out her hand to him.

"Come on," she said. "Let's walk."

She left her hand in his and as they walked, Guy's faint discontent evaporated in the pleasure of his contemplation of her. They walked across the miniature stone circle which crowned the hill, and plunged through the long grass on the lee side where, protected from the sea winds, it grew greener and more lush than the salty stringy blades among which they had lain. Below them, the village came in sight—the manor,

the church and the avenue like a green cord between them, the elms with heads like flowers, dark and heavy, and the silver snail's track of the stream.

"If I were possessive," said Guy, "what a thrill I should get out of contemplating this scene. My demesne, I suppose."

"Aren't you?"

"Not at least over this. I think I want it to possess me."

"I can't follow you when you get metaphysical about the country. Why don't you take it more easily, more for granted?"

"Mary, don't be callous. You feel more than you pretend to."

"Yes, I feel, but to talk about the countryside *possessing* you—possessing?"

"I'm sorry. I suppose it's difficult to express exactly what I mean."

"I don't believe you know yourself. Guy, you're to stop havering."

It was so good-humoured. More than that, it was affectionate, and the rising sense of frustration and irritability at her lack of understanding died down again, or at least retreated to a decent distance and gave him a chance to recover his pleasure in her company. He took her hand and she swung it vigorously as they stumbled down the steep embankment at the bottom of the hill. He kissed it and she smiled back and pulled his own hand up to her mouth.

"Teachable, aren't you?" he said.

"Oh, I'm docile enough," she answered, letting go his hand. "But don't start cracking any whips at me or I might bite."

Once down on the road, they walked circumspectly, side by side, and fell into a comfortable silence. Miss Shapiro's front window shot up as they passed and she screamed:

"There's tea for you here. There's tea!"

"Must we?" said Guy. Mary went up to the gate.

"We're expected for tea at home," she called.

"Your parts," shrieked Miss Shapiro. "I have them ready. I have them marked and cut."

Mary opened the gate and walked slowly up the path but Guy would not go in. An irritation possessed him that she could waste her time going in to this old woman. He wanted no interruption of the mood he was in.

Miss Shapiro ran out of the door to meet her.

"You'll have tea? You will, now, won't you?"

"No," said Mary. "No, thank you. We won't stay to tea, but if you'll give me the parts, I'll go through mine and Mr. Ritchie's with him."

"You'll learn them?"

"Well, we'll try. But what are they?"

"Viola and Orsino. You see, I can't help feeling that the vicar's susceptibilities must be respected. He is a sworn celibate, you know."

"But I thought we were doing *The Tempest*?"

"No, no—oh, no. I did think of it, but *Twelfth Night* is more suitable, I fancy."

"*Twelfth Night?*" repeated Mary, somewhat confused. "What part is the vicar to take, then. Not Sebastian?"

"Sebastian? Of course not. Malvolio. It will suit him very well. He's elderly, after all, and he won't have to do any real love-making. I had cast him for Lysander, in the Dream, you know, but I hadn't quite realised till I saw him in church recently how old he's getting to look, and then, too, I remembered that he is a celibate, a sworn celibate—quite bigoted, I believe, on the subject—and I felt it might be embarrassing for him—the sleeping on the ground, you know, 'one heart, one bed, two bosoms, and one troth'."

This was Miss Shapiro's revenge. To label the vicar clearly as celibate. To remind the vicar, publicly, of the vows which he appeared to her to be forgetting.

"Miss Shapiro," said Mary, "don't you think it's going to be very difficult to get people together to rehearse."

"Oh, no," said Miss Shapiro serenely. "Not once we get the parts settled."

"But is it really safe for me to start learning mine?" asked Mary, dubiously. "And Viola? I suppose it must be *Twelfth Night*? Who'll take Olivia? Felicia?"

"Give me the parts back," said Miss Shapiro suddenly and snatched them out of Mary's hand. "I'll think again. I've nothing to do this evening. I never have anything to do in the evenings, of course. I'll see how I can manage it. You don't think I had better take Olivia myself?"

"I think you should produce. Look, I must go. Mr. Ritchie is waiting for me."

Miss Shapiro ran after her to the gate and peered keenly at them, from one to the other.

"You and Mr. Ritchie have no objection, have you?" she asked.

"Objection?" said Guy angrily.

"Oh, I wondered. I just wondered. I mean—Shakespeare, you know—and if you are——"

"Are what?" shouted Guy, his temper rising. Before Miss Shapiro could get in another remark, Mary said quickly:

"I'll explain the hard words to him. I did it for a set book when I was at school. I believe the young are supposed to know all the answers, aren't they?"

"Naughty girl!" shrieked Miss Shapiro after their retreating figures. "I believe you do, too. Naughty, naughty, naughty!"

CHAPTER XVIII

"THIS EVENING," said the doctor, sweeping his patience cards aside with a large gesture, "we will work. We'll do K to S. Suit you?"

"At your service, uncle."

"*At your service!* What a vile phrase. But it reminds me, talking of services, I never read you that funeral piece, did I?"

"What about the accounts?"

"Well, well. *Laborare est orare.* Scripture and accountancy go well enough together, I would suppose. Our arithmetic'll rastle the better for a *bonne bouche* of religion. Pass me that prayer book."

'To dear Davys from his godmother', read Mary on the flyleaf. "Uncle, did you once have a godmother?"

"I suppose we all have 'em one time or another," said the doctor, absently, flicking over the pages. "Like measles."

"Who *was* your godmother?"

"Haven't an idea. Some aunt, I dare say."

"Don't you care for relatives, uncle?"

"Can't abide 'em. You don't know how lucky you are, my dear, being an orphan. I suppose people have wasted a great deal of sympathy on you? Looked

solemn when you've told 'em you've no parents and so forth?"

"Well, yes, I suppose some do look—kind of——"

"Holy? eh? I know that expression. It's a tribute they think they ought to pay to convention. Quite unnatural in my opinion. D'you know what Samuel Butler says about parents and children?"

"Of course I don't. I've never read Samuel Butler."

"No? Hardly a school classic, I suppose."

"Uncle, you are a pig. My knowledge of the English classics is not confined to the school brand."

"Thanks to me—no. I'd have got round to Samuel Butler in time."

"Well, what *does* he say?"

"Oh, something like this: 'The complete severance of the child from his father begins nine months before the child is born.' Splendid, isn't it?"

"Simply horrible, and you know it. I only hope my children never think like that about me and their father."

"They will, my dear, only they'll be too polite to say so for you'll have taught them such perfect manners. Never have any relatives but those you choose yourself. D'you think I should be able to love you as I do if you were my *real* niece? Not on your life."

The doctor pulled Mary towards him and kissed her.

"As Peachum says to his daughter in the *Beggar's Opera*—You want to *marry* Macheath? Good heavens, d'you think yer mother and I would have lived together all these years so happily if we'd been *married*?' "

There was a slight pause.

"Amused?" asked the doctor, looking anxiously at his niece.

"Amused, yes, but not convinced."

"Oh, dear. Oh, dear, oh dear. I don't believe you are amused, you know. Not old enough perhaps."

He settled himself back in his chair, chanting happily under his breath in a kind of sing-song:

"Not old enough, not old enough. Years too tender and ears too red."

"Read me the blessed psalm or whatever it is, uncle, and stop blathering."

"All right. It's an epistle. Let's see. First we marry, then we baptise, then we confirm. (I was confirmed once, Mary. In Wells Cathedral.) Then we are sick and are visited, ah—and then we die. How do you feel about death, my dear Mary? Do you fear it? Welcome it as a bridegroom? Or merely cock a snoop at it?"

Mary thought for a moment.

"Since you ask me, I suppose I cock a snoop—if I think of it at all."

"I die daily," said the doctor, and sat back, vastly pleased with his quotation. His piercing blue eyes stared at her in challenge. He was like a dog, tense, its legs stiff, its muscles taut, waiting for the ball to be thrown back again and the spring of its being released.

"Uncle," said Mary severely, "where did you pick up that dreadful expression?"

"Ah, I got you, I got you," shouted the doctor, de-

lighted with himself. "From St. Paul! From the good book! It's in the burial service. It's just one of the nuggets in the funeral gold mine. There isn't a service in the book I like better, my dear. It's a veritable treasure house. There's not a word I disagree with from beginning to end. There's richness for you!" (and he slapped the leather cover.)

"Read me the epistle then."

"Mary, my love, it's a feast. It's the most wonderful piece of eloquence since—since Pericles."

He began to read:

> 'Now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead.'

He broke off. "You don't think I believe that?" he asked his niece anxiously. "It's the words, you know, just the words." He went on reading with mounting enjoyment and brought the epistle to a triumphant end, glowing at Mary with almost as much pride as if he had written it himself.

"Good value, eh? Pull me up, my dear."

He held out his hand and Mary helped him up from his deep chair.

"What's up?" He looked anxiously into her face. "What's up? You didn't like it?"

"Uncle, you're old. I don't like to think I'll hear it read over you, that's all."

"Lord, there's sentiment!" exclaimed the doctor, taking her arm and pushing her roughly through the door into the passage.

"We're all old some time in our lives, and all dead too. Most of us are dead all of our lives. You be thankful you've an uncle who'll only be dead at the end of his, and not before."

"Oh, I am, I am," cried Mary, "and I love you quite inconsolably and hysterically."

"There. That's what I like to hear. Inconsolably and hysterically."

The doctor thrust her into the chair at his study desk. He pushed aside the sheaves of bills and letters, many of them unopened, and put a pen in her hand and a pile of bill forms in front of her.

"Off we go. *Laborare est orare.* Let's put *in nomine* at the top of the bills and *laus Deo* at the bottom, shall we? No? Well, perhaps not. It's a sadly irreligious world. Mrs. Kemp. . . ."

The details began, the doctor tallying up from his casebook the visits paid, the prescriptions written. With each one he did a quick reckoning, based on what he called his 'schedule for shorn lambs'. This was a method, strictly calculated, which he had devised for reducing fees to poorer patients and increasing them to the wealthy. No agricultural insurance existed at this time, so that his panel was a very small one. A large number of his patients could ill-afford a doctor's fees, yet obtained no help from the State. Unfortunately his

richer patients were few, but then, as he remarked to Mary, "They have expensive illnesses. A migraine is worth three rheumatic limbs, a finger sawn off in a machine, and a toss from a bull. A gentle bronchitis, I reckon, squares up to a broken leg, three weeks of pneumonia in a damp cottage and ingrowing toe-nails."

Only occasionally did Mary feel called upon the protest.

"Mrs. Powell," he began. "Ah, there's a poor wretch now, with her damned tubercular children. All morons, every one of 'em. They cumber the earth. Ought to be quietly and painlessly exterminated. Pass her over. In any case, of course, we don't have to charge her. She pays me in eggs. I'll have *two* boiled for breakfast tomorrow. Make a note of it, will you, Mary?"

"All right, uncle, but I thought you paid her for the eggs."

"Paid her? Of course I pay her."

"Then she isn't paying you in eggs, if you don't mind me saying so."

"My dear Mary, where do you learn these dreadful expressions? 'Since you ask me'—'at your service'—you'll be leaving yourself in the pink next."

"Uncle, stop prevaricating."

"Ah," he interrupted, "that's better. Prevaricating is better. That's a word now that smells of education. That's something to show for all your guardian paid out to that seminary of yours."

"Stick to this point. You're a wicked old man,

uncle. You oughtn't to pay Mrs. Powell for the eggs."

"Mary, dear Mary. Did you learn no economics at school? If I didn't pay the woman where would she get the money for the hen-food? Be reasonable. I like my boiled eggs. Come on now. Jack Pountney. Nice aristocratic name. That'll put an extra guinea on the bill."

At last they were finished. The doctor yawned, stretched, and opened his current case book to look at his appointments for the next day.

"Ah, look now. Tomorrow I have to go to Bridport for a meeting at the hospital. Would you like to come with me?"

It was the first time that Mary had ever hesitated at such an invitation and the doctor was quick to observe it.

"Well, you've driven that way often enough," he said indifferently. "It looks the same as it did three years ago so I shouldn't bust yourself to come."

"Uncle," said Mary, "could I bring Guy?"

"What a name," sighed the doctor. "What a name for a self-respecting man—Guy. As bad as Lancelot, or Arthur. Smells of knightly purity. Thank God I'm called Davys."

"Yes, but can I bring him?"

"Of course. And Felicia too if you want."

"I don't think I do want."

"Felicia is a good woman. A woman far too plain and good for human nature's daily food."

"She's not plain. And I am sure that quotation's not right."

"Well, no, she's not. And it's not either, but let that be. Felicia is actually beautiful but she has a plain interior. She reminds me of some of the churches round here. A magnificent exterior, fine tower, pleasing west door and so forth and then you go in and find the inside restored—all pitch pine and encaustic tiles. Felicia is like that. Her mind is paved with encaustic tiles and furnished with pitch pine. Well, we don't take her?"

"I think not."

"But we take Guy?"

"If you really don't mind."

"I do mind, but I am unselfish. I am your old Dickensian uncle who smiles through his tears. Bring Guy and I think I'll leave you there to come back on your own. You won't want to be pinned down to my movements. I may be about an hour or so at the hospital."

"Thank you, uncle."

"Dickensian uncle?"

"Very Dickensian. Positively cheeryble."

"Remus uncle?"

"Very Remus."

Uncle and niece returned to the sitting-room fire in a dusty cloud of private banter and the doctor pulled out the *Hunting of the Snark* and read it to Mary from beginning to end.

CHAPTER XIX

THE DOCTOR DROPPED Mary and Guy a few miles east of Bridport and they left the main road and crossed the fields towards the curiously shaped hill called Shipton, a conical eminence with a long narrow summit tapering to a fine ridge, embrowned with coarse dry grass and heath, for all the world as if a wooden boat were upturned to dry upon a mound of green shingle. They walked slowly higher and higher up the hillside, speaking very little. The understanding between two people in love is so tremulous and uncertain (for they are in those early stages like two leaves carried upon a stream, now coalescing, now dividing, now glancing off one another, racing side by side till a final eddy unites them or perhaps separates them from each other for ever) that it is only too easy for some extraneous thing to slip, like a slide, between them and cut them off from each other. So at first it seemed on this warm June day, for each of them was seeing this part of the country after an absence and their reactions to it, being different, were a severing and not a uniting element. Guy looked restlessly from point to point—from the tremendous jutting bluff of Eggardon to the distant twin heights of Lewesden and Pilsdon, and from them to the coast, always in search of commentable material, as

though he must be for ever pulling the landscape towards him and calling Mary's attention to it. He could enjoy only if Mary enjoyed, observe only what she would observe also, and was capable of no independent pleasure or sensation. Although she was ready enough to share his discoveries and emotions with him, or rather to complete them for him by adding her quota of pleasure and appreciation, she was in fact quite absorbed by her own reactions and quite satisfied. She cried out with joy at the feel of the cool turf pelt under her feet and at one moment even flung herself down and rolled on it like a little animal, pressing her face into the thick starred quilt of thyme and sniffing it ecstatically. But that is a game that only one can play. Watching her, Guy became more and more aware that her happiness was independent of his presence and that he could neither enter it himself nor attract her out of its orbit into his own. He began to feel as though this animal happiness of hers possessed an identity, that it was a kind of third person walking between them, that it was a rival to be destroyed. Perversely he wished the day would cloud over, and disappointment, or even unhappiness come upon her that, insufficient at last, she would turn to him. But the sky remained an unyielding blue, and the sun shone with brassy splendour. He abandoned his effort to draw her into a shared enjoyment and turned the conversation deliberately upon himself.

"It was sweet of you to persuade your uncle to bring me," he said, and it was no idle remark but carefully

planned, and he awaited her reply with an eagerness which only heightened the drop of disappointment when it came.

"I haven't been over this side of the county for such ages. It was too good a chance to miss."

"But you didn't want to disappoint me?" he pursued.

"Of course not. I wanted you to come too. I said I'd spend the day with you."

"I was going to have taken you sailing."

"Were you? How glorious. We'll go next week, shall we?"

"There aren't so many more weeks, if you're going to learn to sail a boat properly."

"Oh, I don't know."

"Aren't you going in August? It's not long. It took me years to learn to sail a boat properly."

As he said it he knew it sounded pompous and wished he had left it unsaid.

"Oh, Guy, years? What a bore. I'm sure it wouldn't take me years, but in any case, even if it does, I've got years ahead of me, haven't I? I'm not going to die in August. I'll be back here in—I suppose—three years and then I'll take you out sailing and you can see how much I've progressed in the interval."

It seemed to him that he was a very inessential part of her life and he felt hurt, and angry with himself for the oddly school-boyish sense of frustration and disappointment that she aroused in him.

"The sea! The sea!" she cried.

What would unite them? He did not know. He wanted to kiss her but he feared that she would not respond and dreaded to break the spell of her happiness from which he derived at least the pleasure of watching her animated eager face. But as their walk continued he was unable to prevent his exacerbated feelings from emerging into the open and it was with surprise and perturbation that Mary heard in his voice the note of wounded exasperation:

"Mary, I find this walk damned boring."

It was a lie but she took the words at their face value. It was not that she refused to be drawn but that she pulled the bait off the hook easily and left it hanging.

"Boring!" she exclaimed. "How can you find it boring? (She was quite interested in this novel reaction to their expedition.) Darling Guy (and she took his hand and pulled it like a puppy with a glove), darling Guy, enjoy it—enjoy it—enjoy it!"

She worried him, teased him, danced backwards and forwards, pulling him after her on the slippery turf. At last she flung herself upon him and kissed him.

"Let me make love to you," he said quickly.

"Not now, not now." She twisted out of his grasp, ran a few steps from him and then hesitated. She took his hands again, her face sober but her quicksilver mood only touching his at a tangent for this one instant and trembling to escape once more.

"Later," she said. "Make love to me later. I want you to. Believe that." She kissed him again, so quickly

that he was hardly aware of her mouth. Then she was off over the turf.

They walked for some time in silence. The sea was out of sight again. They were rounding the northern side of the hill, looking over the Marshwood Vale where the valleys are so deep and the lanes so high-hedged that the farms and scattered villages are easily hidden by coppices, flanks and deep foldings of down, and only an occasional bead of smoke rising behind the smooth convexity of a hill betrays the presence of a farmstead. Looking over the scene, Guy was overwhelmed with a sense of loneliness. He swung the lunch haversack off his shoulders and sat down abruptly on the open turf.

"Time for lunch," he said, in a dictatorial tone. Mary's face puckered.

"I'm not ready for it," she said stubbornly. "I wanted to get to the top of Shipton. We ought to see the channel again from there."

"Selfish little beast," said Guy, attempting to keep the conversation lighthearted. "Who's carrying the lunch?"

"I will," retorted Mary, and picked it up with exasperating nonchalance, about to walk on.

"No, you don't." Guy caught her and pulled her down on the grass. "No, you don't. You do what I want for a change."

They glared at each other, on the verge of a quarrel and then the girl suddenly relaxed, lay back on the yielding turf and pulled him over on top of her.

"Love me," she said. "Love me. Up here. The sky's like a blanket it's so close. We might be floating, mightn't we, on a carpet over the hills. Guy, I want to kiss you."

The bright air, the sense of the motion of the earth which walking on a high upland engenders, the springy turf had induced in Mary such an absorption with her physical sensations that she slipped as easily from walking into love-making as if to lie on the turf with Guy were as natural to her as rolling on it by herself in animal enjoyment. And when he released her she looked up at him with indolent, almost drugged eyes, and said:

"Now feed me. I'm too lazy to lift a sandwich to my own mouth." And they ate and kissed and interrupted their mouthfuls with random embraces so that love and landscape, food and kisses mingled into one chord of pure pleasure and indistinguishable delight. Guy's restless dissatisfied mood was dispelled, for the harmony they had reached persisted throughout the afternoon, a spheral music encompassing them from end to end of the domed sky under which they walked above the world. And not till they were climbing down on the Bridport road and the sense of amplitude left them did Guy feel the analytical paralysis creep over him and wonder to himself whether in fact Mary's love had not fastened itself on that one facet of his personality which he regarded as the least valuable and most wished to conceal from her.

CHAPTER XX

"DON'T YOU THINK," said Felicia carefully, holding her hands very still in her lap, "that a London life would really suit you better?"

Guy looked with interest at his sister, but without surprise, for the sentiment was one which seemed to him a natural part of her make-up and he only wondered why she had not made the remark before. He ignored the matter of the sentence, regarding it merely as an efflorescence of his sister's personality, much as he would have listened to her opinion on a piece of music or a picture not for its intrinsic interest as criticism but as a curio of self-revelation. He felt that her question demanded no answer. It might have been a plain statement of her views upon him, such as: 'you are unsuited to country life.' He replied to it with a question of his own.

"Don't my clothes sit well on me?"

"You know that it is more than a question of clothes."

Felicia was led easily into censoriousness. She started to knit again.

"It seems that I am compelled for financial reasons to live here," said Guy, "and that being so, I must grow a new fur like the ermine and melt into the landscape. Perhaps I have not sufficiently melted?"

"If it is only financial necessity which keeps you here, I think that could be remedied."

"I must ask you what you mean, my dear sister. I am suspicious. Your generosity is a vice and I won't encourage you in it." Felicia said nothing. "All right, my dear," Guy continued, "let's say I like it here."

"Mary will not always be here."

"She will if I marry her."

There was a long pause.

"I had no idea," said Felicia in a tight voice. "I had no idea."

"Meaning that I am your wicked brother who pursues women and casts them off like a—like a worn-out glove, perhaps? Felicia, my dear, you always thought in clichés."

"Don't discuss me," said Felicia with a touch of anger. "You can't marry Mary. She is too young."

"That observation is not worth a reply."

"Why did you not marry while you were in London—if you must marry? You had opportunity enough there."

"Opportunity is hardly a basis for a satisfactory marriage."

"It wouldn't last. Mary may be dazzled by you now, but it won't last. She'll want someone more her own type."

"Mary doesn't seem to me to be a type. Neither, I hope, am I. I suppose you will allow love to enter into it somewhere?"

"Love? What can Mary know of love?"

"Really, Felicia, I can't see why Mary should not know something of love. The state of your own heart is no criterion for other people's."

"Oh, Guy, how cruel."

"Cruel? I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be cruel, but I think you have no right to judge an emotion of which you have had on your own confession no experience."

"I use my observation and judgment. I do not believe that Mary loves you."

"People have, you know. I am not wholly unlovable."

"It seems to me wicked to compare that kind of love, the love your—your mistresses had for you, with the love you expect from your wife."

"You mean—they were the playthings of an hour? In a sense, yes, but not all of them wanted to be. At least one had very wifely sentiments for me. It is I who was at fault. But now, if Mary wishes to marry me and I wish to marry her——"

"Have you asked her?"

"No."

"I think she will refuse."

"You hope she will refuse."

"I am very fond of Mary."

"So am I, Felicia dear, and as we both love her in our different ways I should have thought the arrangement was admirable from everyone's point of view."

Felicia got up and looked out of the window.

"Here is Mr. Wrottesley coming up the drive. It's

probably about the fête. I shouldn't stay, Guy. It would bore you."

"On the contrary, it would delight me. I intend to play a large part in this fête. Am I not the local squire? I trust I am going to be asked to open it, to judge the prettiest ankle competition, and to give away the prizes. No doubt some little child is already being trained by the schoolmistress to make me a speech."

"The doctor usually opens the fête."

"Ah, but you haven't had a squire here for fifteen years."

"Please, dear Guy, don't interfere with this matter. Leave it to us."

"You make me feel a foreigner."

"To the country people you are, I'm afraid."

"Yet I was brought up here."

"Perhaps you've grown away from it all. Do go, Guy. Here he comes."

But Guy remained.

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Wrottesley."

"How are you? And you, Felicia? What a beautiful day. Not too warm. Do you like the heat?"

"I do now I live in the country."

"Ah," said the vicar vaguely. "In the country. And how much longer are you staying with us?"

"I live here, vicar."

"You'll pine for the fleshpots, my boy. When winter comes. Mark my words, you'll pine for the fleshpots."

"Have you come about the fête, Mr. Wrottesley?"

"Yes, of course, we must discuss the fête."

Mr. Wrottesley's mind was all thumbs. He could not unravel the problem which Guy's presence set him. In his pocket were the remaining slips of paper. He fingered them, though he knew the writing on them by heart, as though his finger tips, sensitive as a blind man's, could decipher the faint indentations of the calligraphy. But how was he to introduce them? 'I do not drink whisky.' He caught at the words which had just left his mouth.

"Fleshpots, Guy. Fleshpots. I suppose you lived a very gay life in London, eh? Must be dull for you here."

"Dullness is a comparative word, vicar. What is duller than London is not necessarily dull in itself. At least I do not find it so."

"But parties, now." Mr. Wrottesley spewed the unfamiliar word off his tongue as if it were slightly blasphemous. "You must miss the cocktail parties which are such a feature of London society, I believe."

"I hardly moved in society."

"Did you not? Oh, come now. I expect you underestimate yourself."

"He keeps his London life severely to himself," said Felicia. "Not even his sister is allowed to know much of it."

"Was it so very wicked?" Mr. Wrottesley smiled with ghastly bonhomie at Guy, and wished him a thousand miles away. Guy smiled back. An enigmatical, unrevealing smile.

"I must confess," Mr. Wrottesley ploughed on bravely, "I should hardly know how—suppose such a life——"

"Vicars do not generally partake of it, Mr. Wrottesley."

"No, perhaps not. But were I asked—to a cocktail party, I should have to refuse, for I hardly touch alcohol. A mild sherry perhaps. But spirits never."

But neither Guy nor Felicia commented on this or recalled for his convenience the evening at the doctor's when he had consumed a whisky and soda. Instead, Guy's response deflected the conversation and sent it spinning like a curler out of his reach.

"Have no fear, vicar. You won't ever get asked to cocktail parties here Your temperance is under no strain. But talking of temperance reminds me of an idea I had about the fête. What about a recipe stall—for home-made wines and jams and so forth? With the recipes made up, of course."

"I don't quite follow you."

"Oh, yes, Guy, yes!" cried Felicia. To her, the conversation seemed at last to have returned to normalcy, and she entered it with relief. "It's a very good idea. Mrs. Brown writes up a recipe for home-made jelly—say at threepence a copy. And there's a pot of jelly on the stall for anyone to taste."

"At threepence a taste."

Brother and sister were delighted with their arrangements for the vicar's fête. They swept on in an organising fervour. Mr. Wrottesley began to dislike

Guy. His rejoinders to his suggestions became guarded, even a little acrimonious.

"I don't think, Guy, that you quite appreciate our ways down here. . . . No, no, I cannot feel that would go down well . . . I am doubtful of the value of that, you know. Very doubtful."

Unhappily, Felicia was so frequently associated with Guy in these suggestions that Mr. Wrottesley found himself compelled either to disagree with her or to accept ideas which, since they emanated from Guy, he would have preferred to reject. Suddenly Guy looked at his watch.

"I'm afraid I have to go. You'll keep the vicar for tea, Felicia?"

"Of course, if he can stay."

"I don't know. Perhaps I ought—I think Mrs. Vaughan will have got it ready."

"Well, we've settled a good many points, haven't we? Must you really go before tea, Guy?"

"A good many," interrupted the vicar, "but not all, by any means. Good-bye to you, Guy. You have been very helpful."

"Stay and have a cup, vicar."

"Well, perhaps I might. Just a cup. But nothing to eat, Felicia, really."

"Oh, you'll have to eat. My sister thinks tea the best meal of the day, and you'll have to accompany her at the orgy. Good-bye, Mr. Wrottesley."

Guy was gone but Felicia made no movement towards

the preparation of the meal to which, Mr. Wrottesley felt, she had indeed hardly invited him. His unhappiness vented itself in the expulsion of a tiny barb in her direction.

"You have a closer ally in your parochial labour now, I see."

As so often, Felicia accepted what was said exactly at its face value and was impervious to the concealed hook or the hidden sting.

"You know, Mr. Wrottesley," she said with pleasure, "Guy has quite surprised me. When he first came down here I felt he could never be happy but I begin to think I was mistaken."

"Dear lady," said the vicar, shaking himself clear from his impedimenta of self-abasement and despair, and rising to the occasion at last, "dear lady, you *are* mistaken. You are, indeed, if I may say so. My profession gives me some insight, you know, into the hearts of men and I detect in your brother's extraordinary interest in this fête no more than a desire to overcome his overwhelming boredom. You should encourage him to go back. You should indeed. It is far the wisest course. He is a fish out of water here."

Felicia looked at the vicar with fear in her eyes. Unknowingly, he had drawn back the decent covering of her thoughts, and she saw them revealed and could not escape them.

"I wonder if you are right. I wonder. If you *are* right—his happiness should come first. I don't know."

"Other people's happiness," said Mr. Wrottesley gently, "is a thing safe in your hands, Felicia."

She looked at the vicar again. He looked back at her. Both rose to their feet as though at a command. The moment hung tremulously poised between them, but Felicia was not yet quite ready for it, and the vicar, though he had been ready for it for months, struggled helplessly, like a man in a net, against the curtains of old habits.

"You're sure you won't stay for a cup of tea?" he heard Felicia saying, and in dismay his own voice: "No, no, really I won't. I must be getting back."

The opportunity was caught up out of reach and in Mr. Wrottesley's ears, as he trod sadly down the lime avenue, the cawing of the rooks in the summer-green galleries over his head sounded like laughter.

Felicia went slowly up to her bedroom. The last hour unravelled itself before her. She lay on her bed and wept over it for she understood herself at last. It was as if inside the enamelled case of her personality a new being had come to birth, had grown and expanded and was now striving to burst that stiff conventional suit, to shed it like a snake-skin and emerge in new colours. If during the last few months she had been aware of this stirring within herself, it was only as a vague, indefinable discontent, which she had attributed to the loss of her mother. How strange it is not to hear mother's bell, she would say to herself as she sat alone in the spring afternoon. She did not know then that it was

for Guy's step that she listened, for Guy's voice and not her mother's that she waited, alert, and that the hope which held her poised was not that she should be enabled to face her mother's querulous demands with due devotion and patience, but that some demand, any demand, should actually be made upon her by her brother, some opportunity of service given her, some outlet afforded for the love which, unrecognised yet, was growing in her heart.

In all Felicia's life, the demands made upon her had been for the most part material. She would have denied this, perhaps, from a habit of mind which regards the church as a necessarily spiritual institution. In fact, however spiritual the source of Felicia's generosity, sympathy and kindness, it engaged her on a purely material plane. She had nursed, she had provided, she had organised and raised money, she had been practical and capable. It was symbolic of her attitude to her religion that her first act on receiving her mother's money was one of practical generosity, to put a heating system into the church. But with Guy she had found herself on new ground. He was not sick: he needed no restoratives; he was not poor: he required no hot soups, no baskets of nourishing provisions, no bundles of firewood or buckets of coal. He was not a material object to be improved by a new heating system nor a fête to be organised. The simple demands he had made upon her time were merely those which any hotel could have satisfied. The sensitive

engine of Felicia's sympathy, starved of its usual fuel, had shown signs of running to a stop. It is not merely nature which abhors a vacuum. The loss of her mother not only made a break in Felicia's routine of daily goodness, it forced her to seek for it a new occupation and as Guy seemed to require none of her usual services, she was compelled to search for something in him which required her. In these last few weeks it had dawned slowly upon her awakening heart that what Guy required was love. If Felicia had not before this allowed herself much time for the consideration of people's emotional needs, it was merely because she was fully occupied in other ways and because most of the people with whom she came in contact needed so clearly ministration of an obvious and practical kind. She had been apt to think of those she helped as, like her mother, patients. Her private discovery of Guy's needs startled her, a little frightened her, but at the same time offered a challenge which she must accept. What she had not realised was that although her brother's needs were emotional, it was not upon her that he could make any demand and that in offering him her love, she was offering him something which he did not want. At once a new situation arose in which she inevitably became the suppliant, for there is no more importunate creature than affection unexpended or refused. Her own desire to meet Guy's need was converted into a necessity for herself. As she lay on her bed, her face hot with tears, she cried to herself over and over again

in an abandon of misery: 'Only need me, Guy! Guy, if you only wanted me.' The phrases of a childish *grande passion* formed themselves in her mind (had not Guy always accused her of thinking in clichés?). 'I would go to the ends of the earth for you. I would destroy myself for you!' Desperately, she desired him ill, or in danger that she might have an opportunity of proving her love.

Recalling her conversation with him, she writhed. Throughout her life she had found her power of speech perfectly adequate for her purposes. Now it had failed her. She felt one thing and said another. Her vocabulary ruled her and she was slave to habits of mind which refused to allow her new feelings expression, which suppressed them, edited them out of existence and bludgeoned them into silence in order to preserve her normal façade. The words she had spoken this afternoon she had spoken because she must. They were the words she knew. She could not find others. Almost she could have wished she had been silent. She recalled every word of her conversation with Guy and saw with that vivid percipience in which our words and deeds suddenly appear to us illuminated in a kind of supra-earthly light—the beam perhaps of absolute truth, if such a thing exists—how utterly false had been every sentence that came from her mouth. 'Was I playing a part?' she cried bitterly to herself and knew at once that she was not, that, in fact, she had been her true self perhaps for the first time in her life and yet had

been condemned, a marionette come to life, to go through the habitual gestures and utterances of those lifeless devoted years.

'The doctor usually does these things,' she had said, and knew that she had hurt Guy by her refusal to support his interest in the fête and his desire to show off his squiredom. She told herself that she had wanted to protect him for she guessed how little the village had taken him to its heart. Though his intelligence and his early country upbringing prevented him from making a fool of himself in the management of the small estate, his employees gave him no more than a distant respect. He found it difficult to talk easily to them and their reticence and the slightly resentful attitude they had towards an employer they regarded stubbornly as a city man widened the barrier between them. No, Guy could not have opened the fête, not because of any offence to the villagers—Felicia felt that their susceptibilities merited no consideration in this case—but because Guy must not be exposed to their hostility, he must be insulated against their pride and conservatism, and suspicion. But her words had not told him this. They had told him only that she did not wish him to open the fête because the doctor usually did it.

At the thought of Mary, Felicia's heart contracted. Here, she told herself, she was justified. Any sensible person would agree with her that the marriage was totally unsuitable, yet she was unable to extract from her self-righteousness the old disinterested satisfaction.

She knew that if Guy married she would become emotionally a poor relation, to be supported by small allowances of brotherly affection, cheered by charitable invitations at Christmas time, no longer necessary to his life but a liability, someone to whom was owed a measure of love, gratitude and remembrance. How necessary was she to him? she asked herself, and wondered why in all her schooling no one had bothered to teach her how to ask questions but only how to answer them. For how does one say to one's brother: 'Isn't my love sufficient for you? I will love you more devotedly, more faithfully than any wife.' How grotesque! And Felicia, face to face with the first belated hero-worship of her life, suffered as no adolescent suffers, for she had sufficient detachment to stand apart for a moment at least and see it in all its tragic absurdity and to her pain and frustration was added the burden of shame. She loved Guy and all she could say to him was: 'Don't you think that a London life would really suit you better?'

CHAPTER XXI

"YOU ARE, I suppose, on your way to see my niece?"

"I am. She invited me to tea."

"I'll give you a lift. Get in. Alas, we shall not escape Miss Shapiro. She is watching from her window like the Lady of Shalott. Poor woman, the curse is upon her, right enough. Yes, she's seen us."

"Why don't you drive heartlessly on?"

"Because I am not heartless. And the slightly demented have a fascination for me. How speedily she covers the ground, don't she? Down from her window to the garden gate like an arrow from the bow. Good-afternoon, Miss Shapiro. You wanted one of us and I am conceited enough to suppose it was me. Is that right?"

"Just for a teeny moment, doctor. I won't keep you. But I want Mr. Ritchie, too, as it happens."

She looked archly at Guy and leaned across him to speak to the doctor. A hideous combination of perfume, Tom-cat and general frowst, arose from her body and clothes and he leaned back. She leaned further, almost lying on his chest.

"Napoleon's paw is suppurating a little, doctor. Don't trouble to come in to see him. Just tell me what to do."

"Will you wait or walk on?" asked the doctor, looking at Guy.

"No, he must wait. I've something to say to him."

Exasperated, Guy got out of the car and waited at the gate while the doctor walked up the path to the cottage, ignoring Miss Shapiro's protests.

"Don't go, don't go," Miss Shapiro kept calling back. "I have something most important to say to you."

'Something most important to say to you,' thought Guy, as he waited by the gate. 'Shall I say that to Mary? Don't go, Mary, don't walk on. I have something very important to say to you.' But was it going to be of importance to her? In all their love-making Guy had never once heard Mary mention that she loved him. She responded with pleasure when he suggested some walk or expedition together. They had sailed, and explored, and talked, yet she eluded him and in so doing she aroused in him the instincts of the hunter and produced in him manifestations of the pursuing passion which reminded him uncomfortably of the methods he had used with other women and made him, therefore, reject them suddenly, abandon them in the midst of the chase. Mary was nonplussed when he fell into one of these withdrawn and renunciatory moods (for having repudiated this side of his nature temporarily, he was quite unable to replace it with anything else and presented to her a detachment which seemed almost uncivil). Soon, the habit reasserted itself and he was pursuing her as ardently as ever and as delighted in her quick responsive return.

"Mr. Ritchie!" He awoke from his thoughts to hear

Miss Shapiro addressing him. "I wanted to show you this. To ask you if you thought it was all right. You will appreciate it, I am sure."

She held up a large studio portrait of herself as Cleopatra.

'How odd it is,' thought Guy, 'that the style of this dress, although it is only a theatrical costume, stamps it so indelibly of its period. A Cleopatra would not look like this on a London stage today. And the shape of the face——' he glanced up at Miss Shapiro and she was enchanted.

"It's still a good likeness?"

"Yes," he said. "It's excellent." (And to himself) 'But the women of that epoch had differently shaped faces. It is extraordinary. Almost one would believe the shape of their skulls to be different now. Yet it's only about thirty years. It's not a milennium. I might be comparing Piltdown man with the twentieth-century species.'

Aloud he said: "What was the important matter you wanted to ask me?"

The doctor, sitting in the car, pressed his horn down.

"I've two or three of these portraits left. I used to give them to my admirers, you know."

"Will you give me one?"

"You naughty boy! Of course, I will, but I really had someone else in mind. Someone you know *very well*—so I thought I would ask you first——"

'But Felicia has got one of these,' thought Guy, remembering that he had seen one in a bureau drawer.

"You'll be able to tell me better than anyone. Oh, I've two eyes in my head."

"Very fine ones, Miss Shapiro, if I may say so."

"Oh," she screamed," you wicked roué! You wicked, wicked Don Juan!" And she tapped his cheek with a spiky nail.

"It's *Mary*," she whispered, close to his ear. "She'll be going so soon and I thought she'd like it as a little memento of me. I thought you could find out tactfully. You see I've only two or three left. I don't want . . . that is, only if she would really like it, and value it, you know."

"She will, I am sure. Why didn't you ask the doctor? Wouldn't he know best?"

"Ah, an uncle. I always think his affection for her a little fatuous, you know. He's a dear man, and so good to me. I'm not ungrateful—don't think that—but—he's not very sensitive, is he? An east wind, I always say. Bracing. But hardly sensitive."

The doctor pressed his horn again.

"You see what I mean," said Miss Shapiro.

"Well, as far as I know Mary, she'll be delighted by such a present. Would you like me to broach the matter to her, only hint at it, you know? Perhaps there is some other character she would prefer."

"No, no, she must have this. It is my greatest. No other would do."

The doctor played a tattoo on his horn and Guy raised his hat.

"I must go. Thank you for confiding in me, Miss Shapiro."

"My greatest part," she went on, ignoring his remark and following him out of the gate. As he opened it and walked up to the car he heard her still resonant voice burst out:

Show me, my women, like a queen: go fetch
My best attires—I am again for Cydnus,
To meet Mark Antony.

"In five minutes' time we shall be at the house," said the doctor. "There is something I want to ask you."

"It's an afternoon of questions," said Guy cheerfully.

"So it seems. I feel obliged to ask you if your intentions towards my niece are serious."

Guy stiffened. "My intentions?"

"Yes, my dear fellow. I've no doubt Mary has intentions. They may be serious or they may not, but for financial reasons the girl's intentions don't really count. Yours do. If you have pursued my niece merely for the pleasure of the sport——"

"I have not, sir."

The doctor laughed and mumbled to himself:

They sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care,
They pursued it with forks and hope,
They threatened its life with a railway share——

"We're nearly there." (He slowed the car to a crawl.) "You doubtless see the point. Railway shares, my dear Guy. How many of 'em have you got—shares, I mean, railway or otherwise?"

"I think you probably know that my mother left me no capital whatever, only a small income, and the house."

"What d'you propose to live on, then? And what is Mary to live on? I begin to suspect that you are very romantic, Guy. You won't say anything about love in a cottage, will you? I couldn't bear it."

"I am intending to farm."

"To farm!" shouted the doctor and stopped the car dead in the lane. "What with?"

"With my brains," said Guy, conscious that he was making a fool of himself.

"I think"—the doctor spoke deliberately—"that Mary is very fond of you. Whether she'll marry you or not you'll have to find out from her."

"Thank you, sir, I intend to."

"Ah. Then you *have* intentions. Now don't dislike me too much. (Really no one would think you were thirty-five.) I am being very reasonable really. I am only going to suggest to you a course which Mary herself, my eminently practical niece, is sure to suggest—namely, that you discover how to earn a living before you think of getting married."

"I have thought of it. I have just told you. I—that is—we—intend to farm."

"*We*? My niece knows nothing of farming. Oh, you and Felicia, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Is Mary to marry Felicia as well, then?"

"I can hardly turn her out of the house if she wishes to stay. And they are very good friends, I believe."

"My dear young man, I have heard of many qualities in sisters-in-law but a willingness to support their married brothers never was one of them. Well, well, we can't stay here."

He restarted the engine.

"Do as you like about it. Just remember this conversation. It's worth its weight in gold. You can't live *on* Felicia and *with* Mary. I advise you to choose one or the other."

While the doctor was putting the car away in the garage, Guy entered the house. He remembered that he had left a parcel in the car, but he did not go back for it. He suddenly thought of Vera and was conscious of his alien status here. To have been asked what were his 'intentions' seemed as foreign as if he had been addressed in another tongue. His London life with Vera assumed the statuesque proportions of liberty. Here in these wastes he had not found himself. He had lost himself. When Mary greeted him with her usual affection and pleasure he involuntarily compared her welcome with Vera's and felt chilled despite her obvious warmth. He ate his tea almost in silence while the doctor and his niece kept up their endless banter,

their quotation capping, their absurd references (which he could not understand) to snarks, and to an extraordinary coterie called 'Miss Meadows and de gals'.

In the first month or two of his stay in the manor he had admired the doctor as an eccentric, had accepted him exactly as he accepted the gargoyles on the church as an amusing piece of baroque on the weather-stained, dignified structure of country life. He collected him, as he collected the vicar and Miss Shapiro as curios, delighted to find the tedium of rural life enlivened by such characters as he had never met with in his wide London circle. But he felt now that he was no longer in the omnipotent position of the curio hunter. He was the hunted. Or rather, he was the rejected, the outsider, at whom these rooted beings from their ancient country stronghold peered out with distaste, and hostility, and amusement. There came upon him something of that panic fear which assails one sometimes in a wood. He felt an overwhelming desire to escape out of this environment. Soon after tea he left, pleading no excuse. Mary came with him to the door. If she was puzzled, she did not ask him, as Vera would have done, what was the matter and why he was going so early. But she kissed him with a warmth which made him repent his decision to go.

"I'll come back, after supper. We'll go out, shall we?"

"Oh, Guy, I can't. I'm terribly sorry. Uncle wants me to go over with him to see the Portmans."

"No matter," said Guy, his rise of spirits destroyed at an instant. "I've left something in the car. I must go over to the garage."

"I won't come with you," said Mary. "I've just put my clean shoes on."

He walked over slowly and fetched his parcel. He hesitated, looking at Mary as she stood in the porch waiting for him to come and say good-bye. Then he waved his hand.

"I'll go this way," he said. "It's a short cut."

He stuffed the soft parcel into his pocket and climbed over the doctor's garden fence into the field beyond through which lay a footpath leading to the manor estate. Once he looked back expecting to see Mary still there, but she had gone.

CHAPTER XXII

"YOU ARE BACK, Guy?"

"I am certainly here."

"I wondered what had happened to you."

"I'm sorry, I ought to have phoned, I suppose. I took a fancy to walk over the hills to Abbotsbury and came back in the little train."

"I haven't been in that since we were children."

"It's exactly the same."

"Have you had some food?"

"I had some over there. I hope you've had some."

"Yes, I had mine. I thought you were with Mary, of course. I was surprised when she phoned about an hour ago and asked for you."

"How was it left? Am I to phone?"

"Yes, she's expecting you to, I think. Though she told me what it was about. She had a letter by the evening post. She's got to leave earlier than she planned, Guy."

"You use the bereaved voice of one breaking bad news."

"Isn't it bad news?"

"She had to leave sooner or later, I suppose."

"She's going on Friday."

"So soon? The doctor will miss her badly, I imagine."

"So shall we all. I am very fond of Mary. I wish I had seen more of her on this visit, particularly as she won't be here again for such a long time. Somehow I seem to have seen less of her than I ever have before."

"I am afraid I have monopolised her."

"Guy, you spoke to me the other day about her."

"I'd like you to forget about it. Will you?"

"If you wish me to, of course."

"I think I do."

"Then I am—very sorry."

"Do you know, Felicia, I believe you really are. I always feel your sorrow is like your charity, given in duty, but you sound somehow less like that stern daughter of the voice of God tonight."

"You judge me very harshly, Guy."

"Do I? I don't really judge you at all. I've some news for you myself. We live in a world of departures. I am going back to London."

"For good?"

"Yes, for good. Oh, my dear Felicia, why do you cry about it? Only a few days ago you were urging me to go. And I am going."

"Guy, did you ask her? Did she refuse you?"

"No. I didn't give her the chance. I followed your womanly intuition. I thought better of the idea."

"I'm glad she didn't refuse you." Felicia began to sob.

"Well then, you have no need to weep over it."

"How can I help it? I am very, very unhappy, Guy."

"Because Mary's going?"

"Because you are going. And because you haven't—you haven't found any happiness here."

"Perhaps I was foolish to expect any. The place has seemed to me nothing more than a photograph. The colour has gone out of it. The life. The texture. I suppose when one is young one is an artist in living. I thought when I came back that I should re-enter that fortunate mood. I didn't. So I had better go back."

"I don't think I can do without you. Guy, don't leave me."

"My dear Felicia, you have done without me for fifteen years."

"But not now, not now. I can't do without you now. I have no one."

"We none of us have anyone, have we? We've only ourselves."

"But you are going back to that woman in London, I suppose."

"She *is* no one. Certainly I am going back to her. But she is no one, less than no one."

"How cruelly you speak of her. Doesn't she love you?"

"She would say so."

"And don't you love her? You can't pretend you don't love her. Guy, I can't believe you would be so wicked as to live with someone you did not love."

"My dear sister, this conversation is taking a very unrealistic turn. Leave love out of it."

"I believe you love no one." (Always the hope.)

"Unfortunately I do. I love Mary."

"Oh, Guy!"

"Once I have gone you can all return to normal. I must go and ring her up. We shall have to have a parting scene. These farewells are as bad as funerals but they have to be gone through. Love affairs, like corpses, should be decently interred. It's a pity that parting has never been commemorated by a beautiful prayer-book service. They thought of most things—birth and death, churching and commination—but a good plain parting, they don't seem to have discovered a suitable ritual for that. There isn't one, you know. The only satisfactory parting is the involuntary one, when circumstances step between two people and part them unawares, preventing these painful farewells."

He left the room and Felicia heard the tinkle of the receiver as he picked it up. For some moments she went on with her work. She was sorting out her work-basket and the table beside her was littered with little piles of buttons, poppers, pins and so forth. Suddenly she paused and said to herself quite clearly, almost as though she were speaking aloud: 'It is not death which brings things to an end but life.'

Pleased with her aphorism, she laid aside her work-box in order to consider its implications more fully. And as Guy returned to the room at this point she was able to express them to him—without preliminary explanation or a restatement of her text. She began, simply:

"Mother's death made little difference to me. How callous that sounds but it's true. One day she was there and then the next she was not there any more. But you came and looking after the house for you has kept me busy—and happy. So death doesn't seem to have disturbed my life much. It's life that has disturbed it."

"Life?" asked Guy, who had not sat down, but stood, his hands in his coat pockets, looking down at his sister. "Life?"

"Yes. I suppose change is implicit in living, as growth to a tree. Mary comes here and her coming brings a change in you; when you love, you live, I realise, in a different sense of the word from us, who just exist from day to day in our various routines—the doctor, Mr. Wrottesley and me. Now, because of Mary, because of your love, you are going away. Guy, must you leave me behind here? Couldn't I come with you? We could live abroad somewhere?"

"I don't think it would work."

"Oh, it would, it would."

"No, Felicia. No, really. I have to go. I'm sorry. But I have to go."

"It's because of Mary?"

"Not altogether. It just hasn't worked out, living down here. The country has never reabsorbed me."

"You have never seen it, only the people in it, and always from the outside. Because you have pretended to be part of it, that has not *made* you a part of it. You've been a stranger from the first. You think we

have all resented you personally and cold-shouldered you, but we have not. It is the village itself which has rejected you, the actual life here which has refused to absorb you. And somehow I believe that if you had not assumed you were one of us, it would have been better for you. As a townsman, ignorant, brash, graceless, the village would have welcomed you and humbled you and taught you. But it rejects you. You feel that it has rejected you, don't you?"

"I had an idea that I should be accepted."

"Why don't you stay here and grow into the place?"

"I don't grow any more. I've outgrown growth."

"I hate you to go. I can't tell you how I hate you to go."

"Because you don't know what to do when I am gone? Can't you get someone to—to live here. Someone to look after?"

"Am I always to be a nurse, Guy? I feel as though my life can't move forward. Can't develop and therefore it will have to move sideways, like a crab. Oh, dear, how difficult it is to express oneself clear about these things. Mary, you see——"

"What about Mary?"

"She is young and very alive, isn't she?"

"Yes."

"And she just moves forward. Now she's going abroad, and she accepts that, not as a change, but as part of her life's progress. She moves forward."

"She's like someone who is walking from John

o'Groats to Lands End. The differences in scenery make no difference to her, I suppose, except as a variation which prevents monotony. The walk is all. Perhaps there's a prize at the end of it."

"Yes, yes. How well you put it, Guy. The walk is all. And life is all for people like Mary. Somehow I feel that I have never even set out."

"You could start now. Felicia, why don't you get married?"

"Who is to marry me, Guy?"

"I think Mr. Wrottesley would like to."

"I am very fond of Mr. Wrottesley but I have never thought of him in the light of a husband."

"Well, begin now."

"I find it so difficult to think of anything like that. I keep thinking about you, Guy, and what it will be like when you are no longer here. I—I really think I must have grown very fond of you in this six months."

"It is a pity that you're my sister. We might have made quite a successful match of it, mightn't we?"

"Oh, Guy! But, as a matter of fact, I'm not shocked. I think I should have been a little while ago. I thought I should be then, but I wasn't. The shock didn't register. Isn't that odd? Am I changing very much? Do you see a change in me?"

And Felicia looked earnestly at her brother as though afraid she might be growing taller or shorter as she spoke.

"Yes," he said, "I think I have noticed a change. And

I think also that you are the only person or thing about here that has changed. And now, my dear Felicia, I shall have to think about packing. Since I am going, there's no point in prolonging my stay here, is there? No, please don't protest. Once I am gone, it will make no difference to you whether you saw me for an hour or a week. I shall go tonight. I think I would rather leave here before Mary does. It will be the only march I have ever stolen on her."

"I'll come and help you pack."

They worked in silence for the most part, Guy turning out the drawers and handing their contents to Felicia, who sorted them into neat piles on the bed. Then she started to pack. As she folded his tweed jacket (he had changed into a London suit) she felt a soft bulge in the pocket.

"Could I take this out before I fold it?"

"Oh, do, do. I've no secrets."

"It's a scarf. What a pretty one! Blue."

"Pack it on the top, will you? It's for Vera."

"What is she like, Guy? Is she fair? Has she blue eyes."

"Oh, yes. Very fair and very blue."

"I don't think I should have suited you. (She was almost jocular.)

How happy some o'er other some can be.
Through Athens I am thought as fair as she,
But what of that? Demetrius thinks not so.

Do you remember how we used to read Shakespeare, and dress up in fantastic clothes?"

"That reminds me, Felicia. I shan't see Miss Shapiro before I go. Will you make my adieux for me? And tell her how truly sorry I am that the play never materialised."

"I think she will carry it on in her mind for some time."

"And still go on recasting and recutting?"

"I shouldn't wonder."

"Well, if it keeps her happy. That's what we all need—something to keep us happy. I suppose I'd better phone for a taxi."

Brother and sister sat side by side on the sofa in the drawing room. Guy was wearing his dark blue suit, but it was warm and he had no overcoat. His hat and umbrella lay along the back of the sofa, and his thin summer gloves with them.

"When I first came back here in January, on the day of the funeral in fact, I climbed up the lane past Pouncy's farm to the top of the hill, where the stone circle is. D'you remember?"

"Oh, yes. We used to go there a lot when we were children."

"I went there with Mary once."

"Did you? You get a wonderful view of the bay from there."

"Yes. Wonderful."

"I won't come to the station with you, Guy."

"No, no. Of course not. I said before—there is no appropriate ritual. There really should be one you know. If you marry Mr. Wrottesley, you might between you concoct a suitable service for partings. It might be called A Severation. Or *Ave atque Vale*. It might be included in the Prayer-book and bring Mr. Wrottesley fame."

"Will you write to me, Guy?"

"In a few days, yes."

"I shall want to know how you are."

"You know now. There's not likely to be any change."

There was a sound of wheels outside and the slam of a car door.

"There's the taxi. Felicia, I must go. Good-bye, to you. There. Good-bye. I don't believe anyone has ever kissed you on the lips before. I hope this marks the beginning of a new era."

As the taxi man stowed his luggage away in the car, Guy stepped across the lawn and looked at his manor house. Stone roofs, chimney stacks and decorative finials were washed over in a pale opalescence under the shadow of the full-leaved limes. Only the face of the house caught the full, unshaded rays of the June sun and in the warm, embrowned wall, seamed and wrinkled like the skin of a russet apple, the windows shone their liquid melancholy gaze for all the world as though they were eyes and the drip-stones their eyebrows above them.

When the taxi had taken Guy and his luggage away, Felicia went back to the house and changed into a silk frock. She put on a hat and a light summer coat; she fastened an old silver brooch of her mother's in the neck of her dress. Pleased with her appearance, she smiled at herself in the mirror. She thought of Guy, by now in the train and on his way to London. He had felt there was no time to lose. She felt also that for her there was no time to lose. She went out and walked slowly down the road, consciously enjoying upon her skin the warmth of the enclosed valley air. As she passed Miss Shapiro's cottage, she saw the actress lying in a deck-chair in front of her porch, surrounded by somnolent, sun-drowsy cats.

"Good-afternoon, Felicia," called Miss Shapiro, "you haven't forgotten the rehearsal, have you?"

"Is it this afternoon?"

"Yes. This afternoon."

"You'll have to postpone it, Miss Shapiro. I'm very very sorry."

"Why?"

"My brother is on his way to London."

"Naughty boy. And he never told me. I hope he's not deserting us for long. All my cast are deserting me—first Mary—now Guy. And where are you going? To London too? You're all dressed up."

"No, not London."

Felicia closed the gate and started to walk on.

"Where then?" screamed Miss Shapiro, eaten up with

curiosity. "You've a hat on. You must be going somewhere."

But Felicia walked on and all she was thinking was: 'How strange that I should have come round by the road. Why ever didn't I go up the lime avenue and through the churchyard. It would have been so much quicker'.

And she answered the question quite to her own satisfaction. It was a fine June day and a walk in the sun through the scented air exhaled from the cottage gardens was pleasant. It was, in fact, quite a change.